

# Hush

*By Clarity*

*Joseph was a pessimistic loner, angry with both his existence and the world. After a misused wishing stone alters his body and robs him of his voice, Joseph is forced to evaluate his life.*



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# CHAPTER 1

## *Objective Apples*

“**F**or fuck’s sake, Shadow. Revive me!” I slammed my gaming mouse down onto my mousepad in frustration as our team lost Objective Apples. The poor mouse had taken abuse over the years, but it still got the job done. Shaking my head, I ran a hand through my unkempt black hair. I didn’t always get so angry with games, but we’d been playing for several hours and were on a serious losing streak.

“Shut up, dude. They were firing mortars above your body. You always do this, man.” Shadow’s peeved voice traveled 1,500 miles in an instant, arriving through my headset. He was one of the four people who I’d been playing video games with for the last 5 or 6 years. We met through a different game and have just hopped from game to game ever since: FPSes, MMORPGs, etc. You name it, we played it. At the moment, our game of choice was Battlefield, but that would likely change after a few months.

“I always do what?” I snapped back at him as I respawned hundreds of yards away from the action. Bitterly, I ran my character back into the battle.

“You always tell people how to play their roles. Just chill. Alright?” He replied in his slow, laid-back California manner.

“Whatever,” I replied stiffly.

It was true that I was a little bit confrontational. All of my family members told me I’d make a great lawyer because of it, but it certainly didn’t win me too many friends in real life. I hated school and I didn’t feel particularly close with anyone there. I showed up when classes started, left when they ended, made some enemies, and participated in precisely zero extracurricular activities. What was the point? It’s not like I enjoyed any of my classmate’s company, they were all superficial and stupid.

My family tolerated me...at least my parents did. My sister Megan was a senior, two years older than me, and we avoided each other like the plague. Like me, she had black hair and bright blue eyes. Unlike me, she actually had a pretty big group of friends at school. She was pretty open about her hatred for me, and I returned the sentiment. I'd made her life hell when she was younger, and I noticed the flare of annoyance in her eyes every time I spoke. I didn't go too far out of my way to annoy her anymore, but her mere existence still frustrated me. Everything Megan said or did made me feel like a complete loser. Although my grades were always great, hers were immaculate. With straight As, she was a valedictorian candidate and her early applications had already been accepted to a handful of Ivy League colleges. She was the perfect child, and I was...well...I was Joseph.

"Joseph!!! We're leaving!" My mom's familiar shrill shout pierced through my closed door. I let out a groan. It was Sunday night, and Sunday night meant family dinner. Ever since my grandfather had passed away four years ago, we ate dinner at my Grandma's house every Sunday. I really loved my Grandfather, probably more than anyone else on this planet. He was a brilliant guy, a theoretical physicist, and he taught me amazing things. He'd take me ice fishing every winter, explaining string theory with creative metaphors and telling me all kinds of whacky stories about his life. My Dad always insisted that the stories were made-up, but some of them seemed like they had kernels of truth. Unfortunately, Grandpa got burnt by the sun too often when he was young. I still remember the anguish in my Mom's face when she told us that the cancer had spread to his blood. I didn't really understand what that meant at the time, but I knew it wasn't good. Sure enough, he died a few weeks after that and I retreated into my room for the next four years.

Grandma lived about ten minutes away and she seemed to enjoy our company. A few cousins, aunts, and uncles who lived in the area came as well, and there was usually a crowd of ten to fifteen dinner guests each week. Megan and I went because our parents forced us to, and she absolutely loathed it. I didn't particularly blame her: the women did all the cooking at Sunday dinner while the men just kind've lounged around and watched football.

"I've gotta go, guys. I'll be on later." My squad replied with a chorus of goodbyes as I exited out of Battlefield. All of them were on the West Coast, so they probably had a couple hours to go before dinner. I often stayed up pretty late playing video games, so the time zone difference didn't really bother me. What did bother me, however, was how slowly all of them talked. They reminded me of the sea turtles from Finding Nemo.

"I'm coming!" I called downstairs in our Sunday evening ritual. Scrambling out of my chair, I threw on some sturdy winter boots and tossed on one of my heaviest jackets. Underneath, I wore my nicest khakis and a collared shirt. Mom and Dad insisted that we always dress nicely for our weekly family dinner. I ran down the stairs and out the door into the bitter cold. Right as I crossed into the outdoors, the cold greeted me in its icy way and I involuntarily shivered. Even the dozen yards between the front door and the warm car were a bit of a trek.

When I got to the car, I piled into the back seat. Megan sent me an annoyed half-glare from the other back seat and rolled her eyes. I knew what she was thinking: 'typical Joseph. Making us all late because he was playing video games.' She wasn't wrong, either. My parents looked equally unimpressed with me. They hated the fact that I spent so much time playing video games, yet they spent hours on end watching television shows about spouses murdering each other. Apparently that was healthy, but burning off some steam by shooting people in an online game was a horrible use of time. I'd argued with them about that numerous times, but they just didn't understand their own contradictions. I sniffed as the car backed out of the driveway and down the snow-littered street.

I always liked the snow. There was something intriguing about it. The way it would topple down from the sky and swirl to the ground. I swear it had its own unique smell, as well. Not like the metallic, chemical scent of rain hitting pavement, but rather a freshness that I could never sufficiently explain. Most kids at my school enjoyed snow for the snow-fights and snow-days, but my appreciation ran a little deeper. Admittedly, I didn't enjoy going out and shoveling the driveway. I preferred to watch the snow from a safe, warm distance. Perhaps I liked it because it gave me the perfect excuse to hole myself up in my room and play games for hours on end. Regardless, in St. Paul, Minnesota, there was plenty of snow to be found. Too much snow, some might even say.

As Dad drove our car down the snowy road, I lamented the fact that I didn't have a car of my own. I'd put in my 30 hours of practice and had my training license, but Dad said that a car for me wasn't in the budget - even if I got my real license when I turned 16. I had dropped the subject when he floated the idea that I get a part-time job to pay for a car. Fuck that. Of course, my parents gifted Megan a car the day after she passed her test. Just another one of the privileges that come with being the oldest child, and the 'special one.'

"I was wondering," my mother began, probably trying to spark some fun conversation. "How would you guys feel if we got one of those Bernese Mountain

Dogs?” Knowing her, she’d probably read some article in her Facebook feed about how they were one of the best breeds in the snow. Maybe she’d even taken one of those stupid quizzes to match her with her perfect dog breed.

“They only live for eight to ten years.” I replied matter-of-factly.

With that, I killed any potential conversation in the car ride, and we sat in bitter silence until the SUV rolled to a stop outside Grandma’s house. We rushed inside and were met by a wall of warmth.

Her house - like always - was immaculate and lavish. Planted in the nicest neighborhood in the city, it was by far the most expensive asset anyone in my family ever owned...and Grandma lived in it all by herself. I’d overheard my parents, aunts, and uncles talking about how they were going to sell this place after Grandma passed away. I really hoped they didn’t, although the decision wasn’t mine to make. I liked my Grandma, mostly because she always treated us grandkids like royalty. She probably saw us as the only chance she had to really impact the world in a positive way. I guess that’s what happens to some people when they get old.

“Welcome, welcome!” A warm smile spread across Grandma’s face as she let us in. Of course, she was wearing her signature red sweater. “Oh, look, the dogs are so happy to see you!” She noted, glancing down at her two corgis, whose nubby tails were wiggling with joy.

She said those same words every time she greeted us. At first I didn’t understand why, but I slowly realized that she was really just projecting her emotions onto the dogs. She was excited to see us, because her weeks were tedious. Ever since Grandpa passed, she sat on her rocking chair and watched television and knitting all day, her joints aching and her lungs struggling from years of smoking. She didn’t want to drive in the snow and she didn’t want to bother any of us, so she spent her days thinking about what she’d cook for us on Sunday. Her whole life revolved around family dinner.

The dogs were sad, helpless things as well. They used to bark constantly, day and night, until all of Grandma’s neighbors complained. Some of them even threatened to get the police involved, so Grandma decided to go ahead and have the dogs’ voice boxes removed. These days, the only barking sound they could make was a pathetic, barely-audible ‘yip’. After having to put up with their annoying barks for a number of years, I found their voice box removal to be a godsend. Family dinners became so much more bearable when all their could do was ‘yip’.

All four of us waited for her to give us kisses on our cheeks before heading into the living room and undergoing a similar greeting for each of our relatives. If nothing else,



we were a family of traditions and patterns. My aunts greeted me with light hugs and my uncles shook my hand, each one of them grasping it so hard that it went numb.

I hadn't eaten all day, as I'd been pre-occupied shooting WWI-era Italian soldiers, so I instantly dug into the brie cheese and crackers presented on the coffee table. Despite the fact that I could eat a ton in any given sitting, I was blessed with pretty great metabolism so I never got overweight. My parents always told me that this wouldn't always be the case, and that I should enjoy it while I could. I fully intended to take their advice.

My male cousins all stayed away from me and none of them wanted to sit next to me. Fortunately, this meant that I was able to take the biggest recliner in the living room every Sunday. It had a great view of the football game, but I didn't really care for football. I didn't need to take part in the stupid barbaric ritual of shouting at a television screen, which all of the guys in my family seemed to love. Instead, I pulled out my phone and started to scroll through the news and some chat boards. It was a better use of my time than talking to any of the idiots in my family, anyways.

Megan was about to load some cheese onto a cracker, when my mom's shrill call summoned her to the kitchen to prepare the salad. She shot me the world's dirtiest look as she sulked out of the room, and I couldn't help but gloat. She'd have to spend the next hour or two cooking dinner and cleaning dishes, and she'd hate every second of it.

On the couch next to me, I heard my uncle Steve in mid conversation with my Dad: "...And then they suspended Brady for four games over those wishing stone accusations. I say, either they can prove he did it and ban him for life, or they can't prove it and they should let him go. As is, they're just going round like ostriches with their heads in the sand." He concluded whatever point he was making with a confident grumph.

"That's actually a misconception. Ostriches don't stick their heads in their sand. It's a misinterpretation of one of Pliny the Elder's metaphors," I corrected him without hesitation, which drew his attention.

"So Joey, you got yourself a girlfriend yet?" Uncle Steve asked me with a gaping smile, despite the fact that he was missing 3 or 4 teeth thanks to his failed hockey career. Almost every family dinner - after a certain number of beers - he would remind all of us: 'If that shot hadn't hit the post, I would've landed a contract. No doubt in my mind. No doubt.'

Uncle Steve already knew the answer to the question he'd asked me. It was the same question he asked last week and the week before...almost every week, in fact. The asshole. No, I didn't have a fucking girlfriend, and I had no intention of getting one.

"You got a new wife yet?" I shot back without glancing up from my phone, my voice dripping with venom. His wife had left him a couple years before. I didn't know the whole story, but their kid Jake still came to family dinner every other week.

Steve snorted disapprovingly before turning away. "I don't even know why I try to talk to you," he muttered under his breath. Well, I didn't know why I tried to talk to him, either, so that made two of us.

Dinner was amazing, as it always was. The women in my family were good cooks, and they never failed to impress. In the spirit of the season, they'd prepared some nice roast beef, along with a hearty stew. All of the adult men in the family had already downed half a dozen beers each, and I felt more than a little bitter that they wouldn't let me drink at family dinner. I was 15 years old, and I was confident that almost everyone at my school drank regularly. "Rules are rules," they'd always say. Well, it was a stupid rule.

After dinner finished up, I did my best to tune out all of the nonsensical, useless conversations around me. I scrolled through my favorite subreddit and let out a few tiny chuckles as I burnt away my free time.

"Joseph, your grandmother needs help carrying something." My mom's nagging voice interrupted my browsing, so I pretended to ignore it. "Joseph!" She repeated, more sternly.

I groaned and rolled my eyes. "I'm coming, Mom." Reluctantly, I headed into the kitchen and helped move a big platter into the sink. It didn't weigh very much, and Grandma probably would have been able to carry it if she put some more effort into it. The platter was metal, and was embossed with a large star at its center, as if it was a piece of Soviet memorabilia. Come to think of it, that was a major possibility, considering that Grandma had migrated from Lithuania when she was a young girl. After delivering the platter, I returned to my chair in the dining room. The dining room itself was an odd specimen, with three or four ancient clocks on the walls - all of which read different times. On the wall were also a couple glass-fronted cabinets which displayed unused fancy plates and utensils. 'Wedding China' my Mom had called them one time when I asked. Who in their right mind would keep dishes, knives, forks, and not even use them? What was the point? I shook my head and yawned. The entire concept of a wedding struck me as odd...why would someone even

want to get all dressed up and dance around like a clown for their friends and family? I guess there were some things I'd never understand.

After what seemed like an eternity, some of my relatives announced that they had to wake up early for work tomorrow. With that, the exodus had begun. One after another, people stood up and announced that they had to be on their way. The exit ritual was very similar to the arrival ritual, with hugging and kissing and handshakes. I didn't take part in any of that myself, except for allowing my Grandma to kiss me on the cheek. That was the price of the meal, I suppose.

"Oh look at how sad the dogs are to see everyone leaving! Poor things! They're going to be so lonely." She said that same line for the millionth time, gesturing down toward her two corgis. Of course, the dogs were panting and carelessly wagging their little nubby tails. They were just as happy as they were when we arrived at the door.

The odd and familiar process slugged along until we were finally on our way back home. I checked the time on my phone, 10:25. That meant I still had time for a game or two before I hit the sack. I wasted no time after Dad's SUV pulled into our driveway, scampering out of the car and locking the door to my room. As they often were, my buddies were still playing.

"Let's rock and roll," I said through my microphone as a smile spread across my face.

# CHAPTER 2

## *The Stone*

**A**nother boring day at school, and I was beyond tired. Playing a third match last night was - in hindsight - a pretty bad idea. I thought there was a chance that we'd get a snow day, but it wasn't to be. In the southern states that get snow once or twice a year, people say that they declare snow days at the drop of a hat. Not so in Minnesota. For us to get a snow day, the weather had to be so rough that dying by hypothermia before you reached the car was both possible and probable. For the most part, snow days were saved for only the most serious blizzards.

"And what was that man's name?" Mr. Bradley, my geology teacher, quizzically asked the class.

My hand immediately shot into the air, and Bradley stared at me through his horn-rimmed glasses, contemplating whether or not to call on me. He was a fairly short, balding man who couldn't be older than 45. He dressed pretty fashionably, and his brown eyes always showed a tiny glimmer of knowledge, as if he knew something that nobody else did.

"Someone other than Mr. Larsen?" He said eventually, but I kept my hand raised high. I didn't know why I felt like I needed to answer all of the questions, but if I didn't, who would? This school was filled to the brim with bumbling idiots.

Eventually, the prissy girl next to me - I wanted to say her name was Caroline? - raised her hand and stole the correct answer from my tongue: Archiletes. Caroline would always glance my way during class and it was beyond annoying.

"Correct. Archiletes was the first person to fully document the parameters of a wishing stone in the days of Ancient Greece, and that's why all of you were supposed to read his manuscript over the weekend."

Taking a glance around the room, it didn't take a genius to realize that none of these braindead imbeciles actually read it. I didn't read it entirely, but at least I skimmed it a bit. It was written in a very old fashioned manner, which frustrated me to no end. Fortunately, I knew that Bradley always went over the readings in class.

"And in case you didn't do the reading," Bradley started to jot some words onto the board. "As all of you know, you can identify wishing stones by their blue hues, which Archiletes describes as 'not of this world, or any other.' Of course, each wishing stone gives only three wishes, but what some of you might not know is that there are defined limits to what a wishing stone can and can't do."

I was pretty sure I already knew all of this, so I started to doze off. I'd signed up for geology because I knew how easy it would be. Aside from my normal curriculum of AP history, English Math, P.E. and Norwegian, the school granted me a unique opportunity. I was allowed to select the science class of my choosing, having already taken Physics over the summer. Geology was the perfect pick. I already knew more about it than all of the other students, and Bradley was notoriously lenient.

"A wish can change reality if specified, but cannot change the past. It can create the illusion of changing the past by altering people's memories, but even that has its limits. If a wish impacts the realities or the memories of too many people - say, the entire United States - or impacts them too deeply, then that wish will be invalid and won't be granted. The stone will glow bright red for a second or two before returning to its blue form. Additionally, there is also no way to directly undo a wish with another wishing stone. For that, you would need an even more rare stone: the Loras Stone, which can undo a single wish." He scrawled the words onto the board with terrible handwriting, oblivious that some handsome, perfect jock raised a hand behind him.

"Ah yes," Bradley called the jock by a name, which I immediately forgot.

"How many wishing stones are there in the world?" The jock asked the question slowly, his mesmerizing auburn eyes wide with revelation, as if he was the first person to ever ask that question.

"Great question, and I wish I had a better answer" Bradley smiled brightly. "The most truthful answer I could give is 'nobody knows.' A few stones surface every year across the country. Back when I was a student here, there were three stones found in this very building. Incredible, huh?" He let the question linger, and his eyes grew unfocused, deep in memory. "After that, hunters showed up and turned the place upside-down, but they never found another stone. All the while, the old trend has continued. Each year, fewer stones are found than ever before."

“Why?” The jock asked once more. I felt tempted to shout out the answer, but I did my best to exhibit a bit of self-control. God damn, he was so stupid but it wouldn’t even matter for him. He was so good-looking and fit, with that tight hockey jacket, he’d just get to coast through life without ever producing an original thought.

“Ah. Well, that is the ultimate question. To know why, we’d have to know the origin of the stones. Some theologians say that a God crafted them long ago and we’ve found all of the easy pickings, others say that a God continues to craft them and releases them periodically. Some people claim that deities have nothing to do with this, and that the stones were created by some sort of cosmic anomaly which we cannot yet explain. In the end, we may never know. In the passage, Archiletes does admit that he was so enamoured with discovering the origin of the wishing stones that he attempted to use one of his wishes on it. It was ‘invalid,’ of course.”

“If you aren’t sure if something was the result of a wish, how would you ever be able to target it with a Loras Stone?” Carol-whatever asked after raising her hand.

“Aha...a fantastic question. “Anyone can repeal a wish using a Loras Stone by stating the original wish in the negative. For example, if your initial wish was ‘I wish I was 10 feet tall’, and you quickly realized how big of a mistake that wish was, you would have to hold a Loras Stone and say the words ‘I do not wish I was 10 feet tall.’ To use a Loras Stone, you must know the exact wording of the initial wish. Each stone only has one use, and if used incorrectly...” Bradley spread out his hands apologetically. “Then you’re out of luck.”

As if on cue, the bell rang. I let out a quiet groan, and jotted down the homework, as Bradley rapidly listed off twenty pages of reading. They were yet another set of passages that nobody else in the class would read. Why did Bradley even bother?

“Did you catch that?” the Carol girl asked, tapping my shoulder.

She flashed a smile, and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. With only those four words, she’d already annoyed me.

I let out a sigh, and tossed my notebook onto her desk. She carefully lifted the notebook and began to thumb through it, searching for the most recent entry. Great. Another time-sucking leech in my life, all because - apparently - this girl didn’t have a working pair of ears.

“Can you go any slower?” I asked. She was transcribing the homework with painstaking care, as if she thought she was replicating some famous piece of art.

“Sorry.” She flashed another smile, but this one was far weaker. “What class do you have?”

I didn't answer. I had zero desire to chit-chat with an insufferable girl who dressed like she belonged in a shitty sailing magazine.

Seeing that she had successfully copied my notes, and proven that she was at least somewhat literate, I gathered my notebook and got the hell out of the classroom, before anyone else could beg me for help.

\* \* \*

I headed to P.E, my least favorite class. There were a lot of reasons to hate P.E. and I was eternally grateful that I only had the class twice a week. I wanted to get there before anyone else, so that I could change before Jarvis Duncan got there, but - as luck would have it - I rounded the corner into the locker room and was immediately face-to-face with the brute. He was unmistakable, with his military-style haircut, bulky overweight frame, and punchable face.

Jarvis hadn't always been such a lumbering ogre, though. He'd been one of the smallest kids in the class, back when we were both in Junior High. I'd tease him about his ballerina physique whenever I could, but it was all in good fun, and it never got physical. Just some old-fashioned entertainment, and he would even chirp back at me every now and then with dim insults. He never used to talk much, though. Whenever he did, I'd just give him shit for his squeaky voice, and that would shut him up.

Then puberty hit, and everything changed.

I'd never seen anyone grow as quickly as Jarvis. During the summer that separated eighth grade from the start of high school, Jarvis gained over a foot of height and packed on an absurd amount of muscle. Rumor had it that his dad wanted him to try out for the football team, and he'd been put on some absurd work-out regimen. I suspected that steroids were involved. Nobody puts on that kind of muscle overnight, and nobody magically becomes such a vindictive asshole.

Once he dwarfed me in size, he never let me forget it. He shoved me around whenever possible, and constantly called me an 'annoying pussy', as if those were the only two words in his lexicon. They likely were.

However, I wasn't the only target for his roid rage. He'd gotten himself kicked off the football team at the end of last year, for starting fights in the locker room. Kicked off a football team...I couldn't even fathom how he managed that. Football players were supposed to fight, weren't they? He probably got kicked for being too stupid to play football...if such a thing was even possible.

"Want me to move? Little bitch," Jarvis chuckled dumbly.

“Go fuck yourself,” I sneered, pushing past him and heading for my gym locker. I may have miscalculated the situation, because there was absolutely nobody else in the locker room. Just me and Jarvis. Goosebumps began to dot my arms. Since his growth spurt, he’d given me some bruises, but there had always been other students around to hold him back. Now...now, I was legitimately scared.

Jarvis pushed me and the back of my head collided with my locker.

“What the fuck is your problem? Did your mom not breastfeed you today?” I said as I wiped away a trickle of blood coming from my temple. Damn, he’d got me good. He usually didn’t hit quite so hard. I gulped. I usually tried to act tough around Jarvis, but the truth was that I was scared shitless of him. I was tall, but he was taller, and built like a truck. As stupid as Jarvis Duncan was, a fight with him would still leave me broken and bloody. A close-quarters fight would be a death sentence.

Seeing his advantage, Jarvis seemed to have little interest in relenting. He backed me toward the wall.

“You think you’re some kind of tough guy, huh?” I asked. I had to keep talking. It was my only chance, the only way to keep him distracted long enough for other students to show up. Unfortunately, as I desperately sifted through my brain, searching for some way out of this situation, only insults popped into my mind. “You come from a family of inbreds, and you think tha-” I began to say, before I was rudely interrupted.

“You’re the most annoying pussy in the world.” Jarvis stated the words slowly, as if they were a declaration of war. “You’re nothing but talk. Talk, talk, talk, talk, talk.”

With that, he charged at me and tackled me into the wall. I braced for impact with the wall’s hard surface, but it didn’t come. I flew straight through the drywall, which burst apart all around me. He must have tackled me pretty damned hard, I thought as I coughed through the dust.

I squinted to see around me as I laid on a pile of busted drywall and old flooring. The place I’d fallen into was pretty dark, and it was far more spacious than I imagined. My eyes started to adjust and it looked to be around the size of a small bedroom. Maybe it was some sort of secret room. How could a place like this go undiscovered for so long?

“Awesome.” Jarvis laughed as he stepped through the new opening in the wall, his signature black combat boots clopping down near my head. I was still laying on the ground coughing, but he paid me no mind. “I knew this place had some cool skeletons and shit.”

I thought he was speaking figuratively, but when he knelt down beside me, I realized that I was laying next to human remains. It wasn’t a fresh corpse, but rather a



legitimate skeleton with tattered, deteriorated clothing and gnarly bones. Sitting up rapidly, I fought back my urge to vomit.

The skeleton wore a long, tattered coat, which seemed to have withstood the test of time better than the person's flesh. A small booklet protruded from the coat's pocket. It was brown with yellowed pages, and I doubted if any of its contents were still legible.

I lifted the booklet, and the binding left small flakes on my hands. Surprisingly, the entire front cover was still in decent condition, displaying a picture of a woman in a ridiculous Crocodile Hunter outfit, along with a title: The Hunter's Guidebook: A Comprehensive Guide to Wishing Stones.

"Woah!" Jarvis blinked, and laughed like a hippopotamus. "A porn mag!"

"A porn mag?" I blinked, struggling to fathom his stupidity. "She's fully clothed, you fucking idiot. It's a field guide for stone hunters."

"Huh..." Jarvis knelt beside me and rummaged through the rest of the pockets, as I thumbed through the ruined pages. People like Jarvis were easily distracted, thankfully, and he'd probably already forgotten about the fact that he intended to beat me up. That was for the best, I decided.

"What the hell is this?" Jarvis chuckled. He turned a shimmering blue stone in his hand, and wore the world's dumbest smile.

"Oh my God," I whispered. It was a wishing stone. It had to be. No other rock made that sort of entrancing color. Jarvis had no idea what sort of power he held in his hands.

This was my opportunity. The chance to change my entire life...to make the world my playground. I dove for the stone, shouting "I wish I was a billionaire" as I did. Unfortunately, Jarvis pulled it away from me at the last second, and punched me in the chest, sending me back to the ground.

"Shit, well I wish you were a hot chick. We can't all get what we want." he said with a half-hearted laugh.

My eyes went wide with horror as soon as the words left his mouth. I desperately looked to the stone, hoping that it would flash red and invalidate his wish. No such luck.

Instead, my usually shortish black hair began to tickle the back of my neck. I looked down at my hands in disbelief as they grew smaller and more slender with each passing second. My entire body, for the matter, had shrunk in the blink of an eye. I'd been smaller than Jarvis before all of this, but now he seemed like a giant. I felt my privates morph with a bizarre sensation, and two mounds began to grow out of my chest.

“Turn me back, you fucking idiot!” I squealed, an unfamiliar and feminine voice coming from my throat. I cringed at my new voice. It almost sounded...cute. I dove for the stone once more, shouting “I wish I was normal again! I wish I was normal again!” Jarvis had no trouble keeping it out of my reach, and started roaring with laughter as the reality of the situation slowly worked its way through his thick skull. “Why the fuck did you do this to me? What is wrong with you? I wish to be normal again!”

“Well, I wish you’d shut the fuck up,” he said with a dumb smirk. Did he still not realize what was going on? Everyone over the age of 3 knew what a wishing stone was...How could he not realize the value of the tiny rock in his hand?

Jarvis still held the stone high above my head, but I jumped for it anyway. I knew that wishing stones weren’t supposed to undo wishes, but maybe this one was different...maybe this one was special.

“I wish I was normal!” I yelled as I jumped. To my surprise, no sound came out of my mouth. I brought my hands to my throat and tried to make a few different noises, but nothing worked. “Testing,” I tried to say, but I produced only silence.

I looked up to Jarvis, my jaw hanging wide open in shock. I couldn’t speak. He’d taken away my voice. This had to be temporary. What had he said? That he wished I would ‘shut the fuck up.’ That meant it was temporary...didn’t it?

I tested the limits of his wish, trying to make noises with my throat, but barely any sound came out. I could make some breathing sounds if I tried, they were very faint. I couldn’t produce many noise beyond that. I could only make the faintest groans and hums. Even my sighs were fairly inaudible. It was as if someone had hit my mute button. I could still make noises with the rest of my body, I noted bitterly as I stomped my foot against the dusty ground. No superpower of silence for me.

Jarvis, slowly realizing what he did, started to laugh once more. Desperately, I tried to climb up his arm to get the stone away from him, but he pushed me down onto the ground harshly. He was much taller and stronger than my new body, and my attempts were destined to be futile. It took him long enough, but he finally realized that he held a wishing stone in his hand.

Laying next to the skeleton, staring up at him, I heard his third and final wish: “I wish my family always owned this town.” It was a bizarre wish...the sort of thing you’d expect to come out the mouth of a 7 year old. Well, I suppose it wasn’t so bizarre for Jarvis, as he was probably somewhere around that age intellectually.

Either way, it had to be an invalid wish. There was no way one wishing stone would be able to alter the memories of every single person living here. Saint Paul was not a small city. I looked at the stone expectantly, waiting for it to flash red. Instead, the blue

glimmer faded and the rock no longer emitted light. It was over. The three wishes were consumed and Jarvis' family 'always owned this town'...whatever that meant.

"Awesome!" Jarvis declared, hopping back through the hole in the wall and heading to stash his stone away in the locker.

Dazed, I lay there on the ground in the secret room, side-by-side with the skeleton. I felt a lone tear trickle out of my eye and work its way across my cheek, falling to the dusty floor. I turned to look at the skeleton, which looked like a young man - although I couldn't be sure. Whoever it was, they died with sheer destiny in their hands, only one wish away from changing the world. I suppose, in a way, we both died on that same floor.

# CHAPTER 3

## *Unbelievable*

**I**t was only seconds later that students started to trickle into the locker room. “Duuude, did the Kool-Aid man bust in here?” one of them remarked with a scoff, as footsteps grew closer.

“Holy shit. Jarvis, did you do this?”

“Yeah dude, I fucked that wall up. There’s a cool skeleton in there, too.” Jarvis’ oafish tone sent shivers down my spine.

“No way!” The voices grew even closer, and increasingly more voices started to fill the locker room, all gravitating this direction.

“Woah. Are you alright?” a guy’s voice asked me. I was in no mood to answer. I couldn’t answer, even if I wanted to. Instead, I chose to keep staring at the secret room’s dark ceiling, replaying the events through my mind. My life was ruined.

“Get Coach, there’s a girl in here. I think she’s hurt or something!” the guy called out.

“Oh yeah, I left that loser in there.” Jarvis said with a loud, dumb laugh.

I closed my eyes and feigned unconsciousness as minutes passed and I was pulled out of the dark room. I didn’t want to face the world anymore. What was the point? Jarvis had been given three wishes, and he dedicated two of them to fucking me over. Maybe he didn’t do it entirely on purpose, but he was certainly a dickhead and a massive idiot. As I got carted to the nurse’s office, I tried to zone everything out, which worked pretty well for a while.

\* \* \*

"Are you okay, sweetie?" The voice roused me from my reverie. Staring at me, less than a foot from my face, was the school nurse, Mrs. Jansen if I remembered correctly. She had bouncy, curling brown hair and a caring face. I think she was the mother of one of my classmates, but I forget who. The nurse's office itself was nice, albeit small, with low-effort medical humor images hanging on the walls. One of them looked like it was taken from a comic strip and read I already diagnosed myself on the internet, I'm just here for a second opinion. Needless to say, it didn't make me laugh.

I didn't answer, instead choosing to stare her directly in the eyes. I wasn't in the mood for questions.

"Can you tell me your name?" She asked sweetly, eyebrows raised as she awaited my answer.

Slowly, I shook my head No. I wasn't lying, I couldn't tell her my name because I couldn't fucking speak.

"Why not?"

I let out a sigh, but was disappointed to find that even my sighs made almost no sound. I decided that she wasn't going to relent, so I waved my fingers back and forth against my hand to simulate writing. Hopefully she'd understand. I had to repeat the action another couple times before she finally got it.

"Oh, one sec." She got up, pulled open one of her drawers, and handed me a pen and paper.

I glanced up at her before I started writing. It was harder than I thought, as my long-sleeve shirt proved to be way too long for my arm and kept getting in the way. I hadn't noticed earlier, but none of my clothing fit properly anymore. I wasn't the world's biggest or strongest man, but I probably lost upwards of 70 pounds in weight and many inches in height.

My name is Joseph Larsen. I was a man before Jarvis Duncan used a wishing stone to take away my dick and my voice. If it wasn't crystal clear before: I can't speak. I tried to write as neatly as I could, which wasn't all too neat. I never spent much time practicing my handwriting, since many of my essay assignments required typing. As a result, it hadn't progressed much since 3rd or 4th grade. I handed her the paper, hoping she'd be able to read it.

"Oh dear," she said, shaking her head and lowering her voice to just above a whisper. "You can't accuse Jarvis of something like that. His family runs this whole city."

I silently groaned. Of course, he was somehow able to make that wish work. There would be no punishment for him, despite his blatant assault and misuse of a wishing stone. In most states, abuse of a wishing stone was punishable with prison time, if

used maliciously. Unbelievable. He'd fucked me over and he was going to get away with it, too.

"Alright. I'll give your parents a call."

I nodded in agreement, as I stared at the unfunny wall images with dead eyes.

\* \* \*

"Oh wow. She's beautiful. You're saying...that's Joseph?" Mom pointed at me, speaking about me as if I wasn't a fully aware human being sitting directly in front of her.

"That's what she wrote," Mrs. Jansen shrugged. "She has his school ID, and all of that. I already checked with Joseph's class, and he isn't there."

"Do you understand me?" Mom said the words painstakingly slowly and loudly, as if she was speaking to a deaf centenarian.

I nodded in affirmation, with a frustrated scowl on my face. Needless to say, I wasn't in the mood for any of this.

"And are you Joseph?" Once again, the words came slowly and loudly.

I nodded once more and wrinkled my nose.

Mom exchanged a quick worried glance with Dad, and the Nurse handed them the note I'd written. As they read it, both of their eyes went wide with fear.

"We've got to get rid of this note," Dad declared, which caused me to shoot him a look of outrage.

"You can't go around accusing Jarvis Duncan of doing something like this." He put extra emphasis on 'Duncan', as if the surname was supposed to actually mean something.

"You'll just have to tell everyone that you wished to become a silent girl, or that it was an accident." Mom said with a reluctant sigh. Part of me was actually surprised that she believed that I was myself, but I guess some stories were too crazy to make up.

I raised my arms, as if to say What the fuck? and held my jaw open. I understood that some people really want to change genders, and some wishing stones had apparently been used for exactly that purpose in the past, but who in their right mind would surrender their ability to speak? Some kind of monk or something? I suppose the 'accident' title would be the only explanation. In a way, the whole ordeal was an accident. Initially, Jarvis was too dim to know that he had a wishing stone. If he had known, he probably would have used all three wishes to directly benefit himself. Or maybe he would have made my life infinitely worse...it was impossible to know.

After my parents shredded my note into a million different pieces, they hustled me out of the nurse's office and into Dad's SUV. Thankfully, classes were still in session so nobody got a glance at my new form.

"Is there any chance we could get her to be able to talk again?" Mom asked Dad, once again ignoring the fact that I was present. Her...she called me 'her'. I didn't know how to feel about that, but I guess she wasn't wrong. My body was definitely not male.

"I doubt it," Dad replied. "There are magical consultants and whatnot, but they're nothing more than snake-oil salespeople. If you want to undo a wish," he scratched his hairy arm and shook his head. "You'd need one of those really rare rocks. I forget what they're called."

Loras Stones. They were called Loras Stones. I wanted to say the words, but I knew it was futile.

"Apparently, finding one of those rocks is like trying to get a liver transplant if there were only 100 livers hiding out in the world and everyone needed one. I'll set up an appointment for the doctor soon, and see what they say."

I closed my eyes and swallowed with a challenging gulp. Of course, Dad was right. My case was hopeless. My life was over.

\* \* \*

When we finally arrived at our house, I trudged through the door ahead of my parents, readjusting my ill-fitting pants as I was greeted by the rush of indoor warmth.

"Hun, you're going to have to borrow some of Megan's clothes." Mom looked me up and down with a sympathetic sigh. She was still speaking to me as if I was deaf. "Follow me," she added, beckoning as she spoke.

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded. If I was going to be a girl, at least I could be a somewhat comfortable girl...my pants were sliding down my legs, and my breasts were already starting to chafe against my shirt.

"Okay, so here's some of your sister's old clothing. I don't think her new stuff will fit you too well."

I knew she was right. I used to tower over my Mom, who was a woman of moderate height - at least by Minnesota standards. Everyone was fairly tall here, as there was a lot of Scandinavian blood in this area. Now, I was even shorter than Mom, who had previously been the shortest in our house. I had to stand on my tiptoes to reach her height. Eyeballing it, I was probably around 5'6" and I was very light...certainly the smallest person in my family. All of my muscles had disappeared thanks to that fateful

stone, and much of my limited fat had gone with it. The fat that remained was concentrated around two regions: my butt and my boobs. Neither were particularly gigantic, but they certainly felt as if they were. That would definitely take some getting used to.

“Let’s see. Why don’t you try some of these clothes on for me. I think I’ve got the right sizes figured out. You should be around a cup smaller than your sister, and your clothing size is around where she was in 8th grade.”

Mom seemed too eager about the prospect of dressing me up, as if I was a doll or something. Come to think of it, she didn’t seem to be too disappointed about me becoming a girl, she was more worried about the fact I could no longer speak. Maybe this was what she wanted, though: a quiet daughter who she could control.

I gulped past a lump in my throat and pleaded with her, using only my eyes. If I had to change, I wouldn’t be doing it in front of my goddamn mother.

“Okay, let me...let me give you some privacy.” Mom flashed a reassuring smile, then headed for my bedroom door. Halfway out, she paused. “And if you have any questions about any of your new equipment...”

Seeing my death-glare, she winced, and finally left me in peace.

I slumped to the carpet, and let out a shaky breath. For at least five minutes, I stared blankly at the overflowing box of Megan’s old clothes. Why me? Why did this shit have to happen to me?

“Fuck my life,” I muttered, but the movement of my lips produced no sound.

Defeated and bitter, I removed all my clothes until I knelt naked before the box. I rustled through the box and found a bright pink bra, which glistened on the sides with some shiny glitter crap. Fighting the urge to vomit, I tossed the bra into the nearest trash bin.

I continued my rummaging until I found the bra that a normal human being would wear, a simple black thing with no frills or laces. Most importantly, It looked comfy. Swallowing every last ounce of my pride, I hooked the bra behind my back.

As much as I hated to admit it, the bra did make me feel a whole lot more comfortable. I twisted from side to side, and was pleased to note that the chafing had stopped. With a grudging nod, I selected the most benign items in the box and threw them on: baby blue sweatpants, a plain white tee, and a pair of...panties.

I never imagined that I would wear anything resembling panties in a million years, but I slid them over my butt. They felt surprisingly good against my soft skin...it was a nice sensation. Even so, I hated them. I made a mental note to buy myself some normal briefs in my size, when I had the chance.



With that done, I began to sift through the box. Every time I came across something pink or frilly, I tossed it into the garbage bin. I became so engrossed in the process that I didn't even notice Mom's re-entry to my room.

"Joseph?" Mom asked, which made me jump. "What are you doing? Those are perfectly good clothes! At least try them on..."

I looked up at her and fixed her with a glare. My trash can was almost full of clothes, and I'd scrapped about half of the box's contents.

Mom drew a long sigh, then lowered herself to the carpet beside me. She softened her tone. "Look, honey. I realize that this isn't easy. I know you didn't want this. I understand that. I'm trying to help you." She nodded as she spoke, still addressing me as if I was deaf. "I'm sorry if I was rushing you along, or making you uncomfortable...but you're going to have to learn to live with the hand you're dealt. Better to rip the band-aid off, isn't it?"

I sunk my head and sulked. I wanted to shout at her. To tell her to go away, and let me make my own decisions, for once in my fucking life.

Mom seemed to detect my mood, and let out another sigh.

"I'm really messing this up, huh?"

I met her eyes and felt a pang of guilt. She was definitely messing this up. She was pushing all of this feminine crap on me and she expected me to just sit back and enjoy it. At the same time, though...I saw that she was actually trying. I also saw a hint of self-loathing in her eyes, as if she was blaming herself for my own foul mood.

Alright," she nodded. "I'll stop bothering you. No more rushing." She held up two crossed fingers. Then, she gave me an unsure pat on the back.

"This isn't really in the rule book, you know?" Mom said, resting a hand on her cheek. Her voice began to shake, but maintained its unnecessary volume and slow pace. "They don't tell you how to deal with...with this...when you become a mother. I don't know what to do, Joseph." She still hesitated, just before saying my name. "What do I do? What do you want me to do?"

I shrugged, and pointed toward my door.

"Leave you alone?"

I nodded.

"I will. I promise. How about this: I'll pick out an outfit for you to wear, for tomorrow. You don't have to wear it. It'll just be a suggestion, and I want you to consider it. Okay?"

I furrowed my eyebrows, then allowed a suspicious nod.

"I might have to weasel around in your trash bin, though," she added with a weak smile.

She didn't have to sift through my trash, but the outfit she chose was still unreasonable: tight jeans, winter boots, a black turtleneck, a thick faux-fur coat, and a scarf. It was such a girly outfit that I cringed at the mere thought of wearing it to school.

"Just give it some thought for me," she insisted.

I rolled my eyes.

"By the way, have you decided on a new name?" Mom asked me when we were done.

I paused before nodding slightly. I made a gesture for pen and paper. I considered trying to mouth my new name to her, but I didn't want to embarrass both of us.

Once she came back with paper and a pen, I began working on a note. As I wrote, I thought back to that pained look in her eyes, that internal hatred when she recognized that she wasn't actually helping. I knew that feeling all too well. She wasn't the best mom in the world, but - as much as I tried to wipe her face from my mind - I couldn't ignore her pain.

My handwriting sucked, but I scrawled my message anyway. She'd probably be able to read the main points.

Dear Mom, thank you for believing me. Thanks for trying to help me out, too. I'm not deaf, by the way, so you don't need to talk so slowly or loudly. I can hear you fine, I just can't talk. I know you'd probably suggest that I take a stupid name like Josephine, but I'd rather try something slightly different.

*Johanna*

I swear there was a little tear of happiness in her eye as she read the last part...almost like she was relieved that I chose an overtly feminine name. The name Johanna didn't have any special significance for me...well, that wasn't entirely true. A few years back, I'd had a conversation with my California friends during a long game queue. We talked about what our names would have been if we were girls and I'd settled on Johanna, mostly out of disdain for the name 'Josephine'.

"Josephine's a perfectly good name, though." A devilish grin spread across Mom's face.

I glared daggers at her.

"Sorry, sorry. Johanna. You're Johanna." To my approval, she'd stopped saying everything so slowly. "I'll let your father know, so he can start filling out the paperwork."

I didn't know exactly which paperwork she was referring to, but I assumed it had something to do with my school and government records. With that, she stepped out of my room, carrying the trashcan full of Megan's old clothing with her.

I sat alone in my room. I considered hopping online and playing some Battlefield, but eventually decided against it. I wasn't in the mood, and none of my friends would be online yet.

Instead, I decided to take a good look at myself for the first time. I closed my eyes and drew a deep breath as I approached the body-length mirror in my room. I opened my eyes in front of it and made a noiseless gasp. When Jarvis wished for me to become a 'hot chick,' I hadn't been exactly sure what that entailed, but I knew now. My face looked like it belonged to a makeup model. My features were delicate, my skin was impeccable, and my thin eyebrows arching. Beneath them, my eyes seemed much larger, but still remained their piercing shade of blue. My lips were pouty, but not too pouty. Kissable, I guess I'd call them.

My legs were long and slender, my shoulders were narrow, and my arms were slim and hairless. My body had sort've an hourglass-like shape, although my hips weren't very wide. My butt, which had felt huge at first, was actually not that big at all, although it was shaped in a nice round heart-shape.

I shook my head in disbelief and scratched my flowing black hair, which seemed to extend forever. This would take a lot of getting used to. I'd definitely have to get a haircut.

Plopping down in front of my computer, I was once more tempted to play a video game. Instead, I decided to search for a Sign Language tutorial on Youtube. I don't know what inspired me to do it. I could hear fine and everything, but maybe it would help me be able to communicate better with people. My mom never said it, but I knew she was thinking it: I had a disability. If I went through life without the ability to communicate, I'd be utterly useless to society. Every day would be a struggle, I'd never get a good job, and I could end up living with my parents for the rest of my life. For me, that was a sufficient amount of motivation to learn a new skill.

"Okay, let's see," I whispered to myself instinctively, and felt silly immediately afterward. The guy in the video was going sluggishly, and there were subtitles, which I thankfully didn't need. As he turned his hands in different formations, I emulated those movements with my own hands. Apparently, part of Jarvis' wish had left my nails fairly long and french manicured. They bothered me at first, but eventually I stopped noticing the immaculate tips. I tried as hard as I could to dedicate each one of the movements to memory. I was great at memorizing things, and my parents often

complimented me for my 'steel trap.' However, outside of school, I'd never really put it to productive use. I memorized smokes on CS:GO and raid bosses in WoW, but now I felt like I was finally able to use that skill for something practical.

Frustratingly, I found myself getting distracted while watching the videos and I had to rewind them every once in a while. My eyes kept drifting away from the sign language instructor's hands and toward his arms. They were pretty muscular...he probably worked out a lot. I wonder what his bicep would feel like if I touched it. No. What was I thinking? I'd had similar thoughts before in my life, but no. They were unacceptable. They were terrifying. I had to put them into a mental box and stow them away. The man in the video was just a...just a man, and I was watching the series because it was educational. No other reason.

The videos flew by, one after another, until I realized how much time had passed. It was already past 3:00pm.

I stood up and walked over to the mirror once again, but for a different reason this time. Standing there staring at the girl, at myself, I started to piece together sentences with some of the hand gestures I'd learned.

*Hello. I'm Johanna. I'm 15 years old. This is really weird. Does this mean I'm talking to myself?*

I cracked a smile at my own bad joke. It was the first time I'd seen myself smile, and I had to admit: my smile was really cute.

# CHAPTER 4

## *The Darkness*

**D**ownstairs, I heard the front door fly open, wind whistling loudly before it slam shut. That had to be Megan.

“Mom, Dad! Someone found a wishing stone at school today!” She yelled it out as if she was heralding Christ’s second coming, oblivious to the fact that we were well aware of the wishing stone incident.

Mom greeted her and said something, but my door muffled the sound too much for me to hear what it was. Curious, I edged closer to my door.

“Oh my God,” Megan shrieked, before pounding up the stairs like a wild dog. I froze in horror as my doorknob turned and I found myself standing face to face with Megan, although I had to look up to stare her in the eyes. She was very tall, somewhere around 5’10” or 5’11”. We really did look like sisters, despite the height difference, with the same raven-black hair and big blue eyes. “Oh my God,” she repeated. “Are you serious?”

I couldn’t tell if she was angry or not, so I simply stood there with a look of surprise on my face, to mirror her’s. Carefully, I raised a delicate hand and waved it. I smiled faintly.

“No fucking way. You got three wishes, and this is what you wished for? You could have made us rich. You could have brought grandpa back. You could have saved starving kids somewhere. Are you wearing my clothes?” She shook her head in disbelief. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” Without warning, she spat in my face. It was so unexpected that I couldn’t even react as the wad of spit landed smack on my left cheek. As Megan spun around and stormed to her room, her spit slowly dribbled its way down my face.

My smile faded and I stood speechless, petrified like a statue. Yesterday, I would've thrown a witty comeback at her or slung an insult her way, but I didn't even attempt to think of one. More than anything, I felt defeated. I grabbed a kleenex and wiped her spit off of me. Plenty of people hated my guts, but I'd never been spat on before. Megan wasn't a particularly mean person, though, was she? Everyone seemed to like her. She was popular, she had friends, and she treated everyone else nicely...except for me. The two of us had never gotten along well, and I wasn't so sure it was entirely her fault.

Sinking to my lush carpeted floor, I hugged my knees to my chest and rocked back and forth. I fought off a couple tears, but I couldn't help but feel...horrible...inside. I never thought Megan spitting in my face would impact me at all. I never used to care much about how others viewed me, but for some reason, I felt the overwhelming urge to make amends with her. My suspicion was that this newfound motivation was sparked because I was going through a difficult time, and needed someone to help me.

Clearly, Megan had the wrong idea about what happened with the wishing stone. Maybe if she understood my situation, she'd realize that things weren't exactly what they seemed. Maybe we could even get along.

Taking a soundless sigh, I ripped a piece of paper from my notebook and starting writing a note for her on it. As I wrote, I realized that she'd probably struggle to read my unintelligible scrawl. Even with my new, smaller hands, I struggled to write with precision. I'd never really learned how to handwrite things very legibly when I was growing up, and nobody got on my case about it. After all, calligraphy and cursive were often considered to be dying breeds. I tore up the piece of paper and threw it into the trash bin. If I was going to have to rely on my handwriting more and more, I'd have to work on it.

With no further ado, I queued up another Youtube tutorial, this one on handwriting. I didn't like the first couple videos that I found, they were less instructional and more show-offy, but I eventually found a good series. Time flew as I watched the videos, where a woman showed the proper way to grip and a few other neat tricks. I realized pretty quickly that this wasn't the kind of skill that you learn from just a handful of hours of practice. I'd have to keep at this for several weeks to see serious improvement. I practiced certain styles side-by-side the video as the hours passed. I was thankful that this tutorial was done by a woman. Her hands were more similar to mine so it was easier to follow along.

Mom interrupted me halfway through for dinner, but I refused to come down. I didn't want to take any more abuse from Megan without being able to defend myself.

Fortunately, Mom brought some food up for me. Even when I was a young kid, I never remembered her being so...mothering.

After I felt like I had improved to a pretty decent degree, I started to re-draft the letter for Megan. In it, I explained how someone else made these changes to me out of spite - although I didn't mention Jarvis' name. I was sick of hearing people cower in fear over the perceived power of House Duncan. Did they actually have that much power? What did it even mean to 'own this town'? Did they actually pay the salaries of the whole cities' government, or did people just fear them? I guess I'd have to find out.

I also added a couple more things to the letter which I hadn't included in the first draft. Taking the time to re-write it gave me some more room to reflect and make the letter much more meaningful. I wrote to her about how I knew I hadn't been the world's best brother, and that I hadn't treated her very well and that I could be kind've an asshole. I felt a couple tears stream down my cheek as I carefully scrawled the words as elegantly as I could. I accidentally even let a couple of the tears drop down onto the paper. I suppose that couldn't hurt my case, and proved that the letter came from a genuine place.

By the time I finished the letter, it was well past midnight and I was getting tired. I usually stayed up quite late, but it'd been a long day. I nervously slid the letter beneath Megan's door. Part of me wished for her to already be asleep, just so that she'd have time to cool off before reading it. I really hoped that she didn't rip it up before reading it.

"Oh hey, you're up." Mom spotted me as I returned to my room. It looked like she was holding something in her hand.

I nodded and gave her a light smile.

"I heard what your sister said to you, and I just want you to know that I'm going to have a talk with her. I don't think she was being very fair to you."

I nodded once more and mouthed the word Thanks I figured that - for simple words - people would generally understand if I just mouthed. Of course, Mom was right. Although I felt compelled to blame myself for Megan's outburst, she was clearly in the wrong. Knowing that didn't make me feel any less guilty, though.

"Do you think you're going to be ready to go back to school tomorrow?"

I hesitated, before nodding again. I wasn't sure what I wanted, but delaying my return didn't seem like it would solve much. If anything, it would just put me further behind in my classes and I'd have even more to stress about.

"Well, I made this for you." She handed me what looked like a large circular pin. On it was a cool purple design and a word in beautiful white lettering: Johanna.

“You know, for if someone asks you what your name is. You don’t have to wear it, you can just pull it out when you need it.” Mom was trying harder to be a good mother than she ever had beforehand. Over the last few hours, she had watched over me like a protective hawk and pampered me like never before. Dad had sometimes mentioned the fact that she’d wanted a second daughter...maybe she was getting her wish.

Thanks I mouthed to her, cracking a tiny smile and looking back down at the pin. It was cute.

Cute. Would I have used that word to describe a pin yesterday? Maybe. I wasn’t sure.

After my ‘conversation’ with Mom - although I wasn’t entirely sure if I could take part in ‘conversations’ anymore - I returned to my room and closed the door behind me. ‘No Trespassing - Dudes Only’ read the bright yellow and black danger sign on my door. I let out a soundless laugh when I noticed it. Standing on my tiptoes, I pulled it off the door and dumped it into the trash bin. No sense lying to myself. I had boobs and a vagina...and I’d used the word ‘cute’.

What the fuck was happening to me? Was Jarvis’s stupid wish really messing with my mind, or was I just overthinking things?

I shook my head and ran a stressed hand through my hair. I flinched when my hand slid through a black waterfall of hair. The sensation was softer than I’d anticipated. Thanks to that stupid wish, my hair and body had been changed...was my brain next? I seriously needed to play some fucking videogames, or else I’d be stuck worrying about my mind until the early morning.

I collapsed into my chair and donned my headset. I’d almost gone the entire day without gaming, a scary prospect.

“Oh, hey Badger.” Shadow greeted me as I entered our TeamSpeak server. Badger was the name I used because, well...I liked badgers. They were cool. I chose the name when I was 10 years old and stuck with it ever since.

“Hey guys,” I tried to reply. I felt stupid immediately afterward.

Can’t talk anymore. Ever. I typed into chat. As I booted up Battlefield, I started practicing moving my mouse around and maneuvering WASD keys with my new delicate fingers. It seemed to be mostly the same, although there were a few notable differences. First, my nails were long enough to be a nuisance and I considered clipping them right then and there. Second, my fingers were much more dexterous and nimble, which let me hit certain keys more easily. At the same time, my hands had gotten much smaller and I struggled to hit the more distant keys. Looks like I’d have to do some rebinding.



“Wait, why can’t you talk? Do you have a roommate or something?” Wrapper asked. Apparently, he’d minimized from the game to read chat.

I’m totally mute, irl and everything

“Really? How?” Wrapper went on to tell everyone what I’d just written.

Wishing stone gone wrong. I’m also a girl now. It’s complicated.

“No way. Turn on your webcam,” all four of my friends demanded.

I took a quiet sigh, flipped my webcam on and started my stream. I didn’t stream very often, but I did have the setup to do it. Right after the camera went live, I started re-considering. My hair was kind’ve a mess from the headset and I was wearing pajamas, and...what was I even saying? Since when did I start caring about that shit?

My friends were silent for a minute or two, and I sat nervously. My hands were cold with sweat, and I fidgeted with them, over my keyboard.

Shadow was the first to break the silence. “Dude, is this for real? If it is...you’re hot.”

Nope. Stream over. I didn’t want this to get creepy, and I’d proven that I wasn’t lying. For some reason, from the moment the red light on my webcam had turned on, I’d felt tremendously uncomfortable. Only my four friends were watching the stream, but something about it made me uneasy. Something about the guys watching me while I couldn’t see them just made me shudder.

Of course, the abrupt end of my stream drew a chorus of complaints from my buds, but I ignored them. If I wasn’t comfortable, I wasn’t going to do it. Simple as that.

“Alright, alright,” Wrapper announced. “Let’s get rolling.”

With that, we dove into my first game of the night. Like usual, we had moments of brilliance and times when we couldn’t protect an objective to save our lives. At one point, during our 3rd or 4th game, Shadow even missed his revive needle on me, and I let out an angry, silent shout.

Are you fucking kidding me, Shadow? Why the fuck didn’t you rev me, I was right fucking next to you! I typed the words in a blur. My unfamiliar nails clattered against the keys, producing more sound than I’d made in hours.

I finished the message, and my finger hovered over the ‘Enter’ key, preparing to send it on its way.

“Dash! Noooo,” Wrapper laughed as, presumably, Dash managed to follow me into the afterlife, as our bunkers fell to the enemy.

“Aaaaah, not like this!” Dash cried melodramatically, before joining Wrapper in laughter.

My finger still hovered over the ‘Enter’ key, but it had begun to tremble.

Then, it hit me.

Today, the atmosphere within our tiny group seemed much different than usual. If anything, it was less tense than ever before. All four of them were joking around and I even found myself silently laughing a handful of times. Why was I trying to ruin that?

In this most recent game, we were losing badly...but there wasn't any stress in the group, just uncharacteristic cheerfulness. In the past, we used to take the game a lot more seriously and bicker much more. What had changed?

That's when a dark thought crossed my mind: were things usually like this when I wasn't playing? Was I really that much of an asshole and a downer, that I brought everyone else down with me? Were my friends better off without me? Was the world better off without me?

Gotta go, I typed in chat. I didn't actually have to go. I hadn't even played my fifth game of the night, but I felt...I felt deflated.

My friends bid me eager farewells, which made a lump form in the center of my throat. My closest friends lived over a thousand miles away, and I treated them like utter shit. They teased me and whatnot, but they'd generally been kind to me. If I found out that Shadow turned into a mute girl, I'd probably just berate him about it after we lost a game.

Taking off my headset, I signed out and sat there on my chair, swiveling around and thinking it over. Maybe Jarvis had a point when he'd called me an annoying pussy. Maybe he was right to hate me. Maybe Megan was right to treat me like trash. Those thoughts milled through my head as I brushed and flossed my now-perfect teeth. Did I deserve this?

Slinking onto my bed I buried my head into my pillow until tears came. It was a tad uncomfortable to lay down on my boobs, so I eventually shifted to my side and let a flurry of tears run down across my face. My whole life replayed before my eyes as I lay there. Every time I shut someone down, every time I ruined somebody's day. I was a worthless piece of shit.

"I deserve this," I whispered, but no words came out.

# CHAPTER 5

## *The Day After, Part 1*

Lying on my side, I stared at the red digital clock beside my bed, watching as 7:13AM turned into 7:14. I hadn't slept at all. I couldn't. My mind had been racing all night, reviewing my life and analyzing all of my decisions. As the clock turned 7:15, I arrived once more at the same conclusion: this was some sort of cosmic karma situation. I treated people like shit, so my life got turned into shit. I was worthless. A human pile of garbage. I spent my time insulting, bitching, and moaning, so the world took away my ability to do all three.

Slowly, I rolled onto my back and brought up my pillow and held it over my face, covering my mouth and nose so I could no longer breathe. I held the pillow there as long as I could. I was half-hoping that I'd keel over and die, before primal instinct took over and I pulled it away. I wheezed for air, which was only barely audible, as my chest rose and fell. Staring at the ceiling, a few rogue tears streaked down my cheek and dripping down onto my sheets.

"Johanna! Breakfast!" Mom's voice called from downstairs. I stared at the ceiling for a good 10 seconds before finally rolling off my bed with a silent groan. My head throbbed from the sleepless night when I rose to my feet. Slinking down the stairs, I saw my Mom hustling toward the door. She was probably already running late for work. As she pulled on her thick gray coat, I paused to study her. She looked a lot like me, or rather I looked a lot like her. I hadn't noticed it earlier, but she had the same face structure and the same eyes, although her hair was a bit lighter. People often commented about how pretty she was, and they were right to do so. I felt my heart swell with a bit of unexplainable pride.

Pride? I shook my head, and pressed a hand to my temple. What was wrong with me? First I'd used the word 'cute', now this? I didn't want to be pretty, I just wanted to be normal. I closed my eyes, and tried to calm myself. My thoughts weren't actually changing. This was all in my head. Plus, why did I have to be afraid of using the word 'cute'. It was just a word. How else was I supposed to describe something that was...well...cute?

I had to stop worrying, or I'd drive myself insane.

"Your food is on the table. Your sister left early for cheerleading, so you'll have to walk today. You don't have to go if you don't feel up to it, but all of your teachers should know about your situation." She blurted the words out rapidly before making her way out the door. From the two seconds the door was open, I could already tell it was frigid outside.

Megan had already left for cheerleading practice. Of course. Megan was a member of the cheerleading squad, which only served to reinforce my parents' image of her as a perfect child. The chosen one.

Shaking my head, I plopped into my usual chair and scarfed down my breakfast. Bacon and scrambled eggs, with a pile of hashbrowns on the side. My absolute favorite. Mom really was going out of her way to help me get through this. I guess I never really realized how lucky I was to have a Mom like her. Despite my condition, she was trying not to treat me like a freak or an invalid. She didn't seem to be angry with me or ashamed of me...she loved me.

I scampered back to my room and stared blankly at the clothing Mom had picked out as a recommendation. It was girlier than anything I would have chosen to wear yesterday. Even so, I didn't have very many outfits to choose from, after I'd tossed most of Megan old clothing into the trash bin. Plus, the outfit didn't include a skirt or anything, and it looked like one of the warmer selections from my available clothing. I glanced toward my bedroom window, eyed the frosted tree outside, and made my decision.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled the tight, feminine-cut jeans up my legs. They hugged my thighs tightly, although my thighs weren't even that large. I guess that was just the style. I'd seen other girls wear outfits like this...other girls. That two-word phrase came to mind with surprisingly little effort, and my stomach twisted with worry. What had Jarvis' wish done to me? I paused, still partially dressed. Was I really thinking of myself as a girl?

Mom called from downstairs, and I struggled to refocus on my initial task. I pulled on the black turtleneck and accidentally screwed up my hair in the process. To be fair,

my hair was a mess in the first place, but now it was just embarrassing. I didn't want to show up at school looking homeless. With that, I began to panic outright.

I glanced at the clock. 7:45. If I wanted to be on time, I'd have to pick up the pace, especially if I was walking to school. Dashing to the bathroom, I ran a comb through my hair, which turned out to be a losing effort. I'd need a real brush. I stole one out of my sister's bathroom and ran it through my hair with one hand while I put on my socks and snug, wool-lined boots. Taking a look in the mirror, I decided I was finally content with my hair. Raven-black and shiny, it was probably perfectly acceptable even before I brushed it. I was just over-reacting. Why did I even give a shit about how I looked? I certainly hadn't ever cared before.

Holding onto my bathroom's marble counter, I held my breath and felt my heart pound against my breast.

Was I losing myself?

The question terrified me. What if I lost myself entirely, because of Jarvis's stupid wish? If it really was changing my brain, what if it altered my intelligence, making me as dumb as Jarvis? I shuddered at the thought, and a tear trickled down my cheek. Intelligence was just about all I had going for me anymore, though I wasn't even as smart as my own sister. If I lost that, I'd be an utter failure. An even bigger waste of space.

My whole body shook, and I sunk to the ground. I hugged my knees to my chest, burying my face between my knees.

Stop it, I silently hissed at myself. With each word, I slapped the sides of my head, as if I was trying to banish a demon from my mind. Stop changing. Had it worked? Probably not, but how could I tell? At the very least, a day of school could give me a better idea of how my mind was changing. If my brain really was turning to mush, test scores wouldn't lie.

Calm down, Joseph. Johanna. Whoever you are. Calm down, I silently whispered to myself, before taking a long, soothing breath.

I'd been going through a difficult series of changes, and it was normal to freak out...to respond like this...to act strangely...to find a guy in a sign language tutorial video attractive. I'd had thoughts like that before the change, and I'd always handled them. I was going to be okay. It was probably all just a phase. It had nothing to do with Jarvis's weird wish, and my mind was just playing tricks on me. Plus, I had no time to waste worrying over that, I had to get to school.

I collected myself, then threw on the scarf and heavy faux-fur coat before slinging my new backpack over my shoulders. It was light blue and undeniably girly, but had a few less holes than my old one.

When I headed out the door, I was met by the morning chill. If I had to guess, I'd say it was somewhere around ten degrees Fahrenheit. Not too bad, but certainly on the colder side. Fortunately, it wasn't snowing and a tiny slice of the sun even poked through the clouds. I exhaled and watched as my breath formed a cloud before dissipating. I always loved watching my breath...there was something about it that intrigued me...the way it validated that I was alive.

As I tightened my scarf, I cursed the fact that my old gloves didn't fit, so I had to wear some of my sister's old pink ones. I marched my way through the snow to school and watched as cars passed by me. It was a relatively short walk - just a few minutes - but I was already exhausted when I pushed open the front doors. A wave of warmth greeted me, and I praised the miracle of central heating.

Usually, the hallways were lined with students when I arrived, but I suppose I spent a few minutes too long getting ready. Classes had already begun, and I glanced down at my phone, 8:03. Great. Now everyone was guaranteed to be staring at me. I'd never been afraid of receiving attention before, but now...now things were very different.

Sure enough, when I walked into my AP History class and stood awkwardly in the doorway, everyone was staring at me. Even our teacher Mrs. Peterson had stopped writing on the board to look my direction. A chorus of whispers spread throughout the room. Rumors spread quickly, and everyone had heard some fabricated version of what had happened with me and the wishing stone. However, any story involving a wishing stone was bound to attract all sorts of attention and conjecture. It was only by the grace of God that news cameras weren't set up all around my house. I suppose wishing stones were just common enough to avoid that sort of spectacle. My hands tightened around the baby blue backpack straps until my knuckles turned white, and I raced to my seat. I was already regretting my attendance...I could've used an extra day off school.

"Welcome, Johanna," Mrs. Peterson greeted me carefully, before continuing her lecture. I expected her to give some sort of speech to the class about my changes and the dangers of wishing stones, but she never did.

Mrs. Peterson was an odd lady, a notoriously difficult teacher who came off as being fairly disorganized. Her auburn hair was often a mess, falling lackadaisically down onto her hastily made-up face. She wore a variety of colorful outfits, and today wore an exciting floral dress and a wide-brimmed sun hat despite the chilling winter

weather outside. Her fashion choices were lively and outlandish, and her teaching method was brutal.

“Now we’re going to go around the room reading from the text. Clark, why don’t you start us off?” Clark was one of the good-looking football jocks who I often did my best to ignore. He struck me as one of those kids who was going to peak Senior year, and then spend the rest of his life attempting to relive his glory days. I sat in the row behind him and had - in the past - spent a good deal of time zoning out while staring at the back of his wavy blond haired head. For that reason, I felt like I knew him. We’d never talked before, though.

To my surprise, Clark was actually capable of reading and did a pretty decent job of it. Bravo for him. The text was full of mundane details about the Abbasid Caliphate, all of which we were likely expected to memorize. The class was supposed to be about the entirety of World History, but - at this rate - I questioned if we’d actually be able to get to the modern era by the end of the school year. We’d be lucky to reach the Renaissance, given how thorough our lessons were. This was undoubtedly my hardest class and I really had no idea what I’d signed up for. It was my first AP course and I figured that all of the rhetoric about its difficulty was just to scare away the idiots. I was wrong. Instead, I was sitting at a rocky B-, and I’d never gotten anything below an A in my life. It was terrifying, and I prayed that our grades would be curved at the end of the semester.

After a minute or so of Clark’s reading, Mrs. Peterson interrupted him to explain the passage and asked the guy next to him to begin reading. That was the moment I started to get worried. Each time one of the students finished their reading and the torch was passed along the line, I grew more anxious. It was almost as if I was a deer standing in the road and a car was on its way, getting closer and closer to the inevitable. She wouldn’t call on me, right? She wasn’t actually going to expect me to read something. Mom said that all of the teachers had been informed about the entirety of my situation...

“Okay, Johanna.” She nodded toward me, pointing at my textbook. “Page 262, bottom of the page.” She said the words impatiently, as if she assumed I hadn’t been paying attention.

My cheeks burned bright red and I looked at her with pleading eyes, but she just didn’t understand. A few students were already starting to crack up laughing as I gestured toward my throat and lips, mouthing the words I can’t. By that point, most of the other students in the class were laughing raucously, like a pack of hyenas. I tried to keep composure, and it took a concerted effort to fight back my tears. First day and I

was already some sort of laughing stalk. The freak who used a wishing stone to give himself a vagina and a disability. Excellent.

Eventually, she realized her mistake. I guess she'd forgotten about that part of my condition. At that point, however, it was far too late. I wanted to disappear...to sink into the back of my chair and become invisible, never to return.

"I'm sorry," she said after a moment of hesitation. Her face burned with embarrassment to mirror mine. With a genuine expression of apology, she skipped past me and prompted the girl next to me to begin reading.

Fortunately the bell rang pretty soon after that, by which time I was actively struggling to suppress tears. They welled in my eyes and prepared to race down my cheeks, but I knew that crying would only make my situation worse. The last thing I wanted was to cause an even bigger scene. My life was already a fucking disaster, and it was all my fault. I'd earned this.

"Okay. Cheer up everyone, because I've got some good news. Instead of a test, we're going to be mixing things up and holding a week-long mock trial for Genghis Khan. Next time we meet, you'll be drawing roles from a hat. I expect you'll all take it very seriously, because the amount of effort you put forth at the trial WILL impact your grade." Mrs. Peterson announced.

My immediate reaction was that she came up with this trial idea because she didn't want to be stuck grading tests. Regardless, I was too numb and sorrowful to feel any relief from the 'good news.' For me, there was no such thing as good news anymore.



# CHAPTER 6

## *The Day After, Part 2*

**M**y next two classes, Math and English, were both easy and boring. I was naturally good at Math and I knew how to write bullshit essays, so neither class presented much of a personal challenge. Rather than paying attention, I spent most of the class-time catching up on homework in other classes, like History. Fortunately, nobody paid me much attention, aside from a few casual stares, and I was able to be pretty invisible for the whole two hours. It felt nice to disappear into the background, after what happened in History class. I shuddered at the memory...all of the laughing. I knew it shouldn't have bothered me. It was just people being immature, yet it did get under my skin. It left one thought swirling around in my mind: would I have been one of those kids? Would I have laughed if I wasn't in my own shoes? Probably.

Our school operated on a tragically confusing rotating class schedule. It was supposed to help balance our schedules, so we wouldn't be stuck with our hardest class at 8:00 every morning. The end result was a complex and muddled system that took new students several months to fully understand. As luck would have it, my next class was both my favorite and perhaps my most important: Geology.

Mr. Bradley smiled at me knowingly as he pushed his glasses up his nose. I made an effort to get to this class early, just to reinform him about the details of my situation. I didn't want to find myself in another awkward situation on this already shitty day.

"So you're Johanna now?" He asked with a sparkle in his eye.

I nodded, and began to write a message on my notepad, trying to write as carefully as possible. My handwriting improved quite a bit in less than a day, but I still had room for improvement.

Is there any way I can change back? Will I ever be able to talk again? I wrote.

This was the key reason I'd come early to this class: Mr. Bradley was the most experienced person I knew when it came to wishing stones. I wanted to get straight to the point. If there was any hope I'd be able to change back, he would know.

Truthfully, at this point I was a bit less bothered about the fact that I was now a girl. I didn't enjoy it, and the thoughts that invaded my mind were terrifying. Still, all of that paled in comparison to the other wish. The inability to speak was beyond horrible. Debilitating. It robbed me of any chance to be happy, ever. I still felt like I deserved it, but I would've given just about anything to speak again.

I handed him my notepad, and the smile immediately faded from his face. "Well," he began with a sigh. "I don't know all of the details of your wish, so I'm not certain." It wasn't my wish, I thought with annoyance. I guess even Mr. Bradley was operating on flawed information. He ignored my irritation, and continued, "If you want to undo a wish, I'm afraid that a Loras Stone is the only way."

My shoulders sunk and I snatched my notepad back. I already knew all of that, but maybe the details would help. I wrote down the word-for-word details of both wishes. It pained me to write those words, and they echoed through my mind in Jarvis's stupid, slow voice. A hot chick. What a stupid prick. In my note, I also felt compelled to add that it was an accident and that I did not wish those things upon myself, although I did omit any details about Jarvis. I didn't want to hear Bradley - a man I respected - speak in fear about Jarvis 'breastfeeder' Duncan.

I handed the notepad to him once more, then studied his face closely for any hints of emotion. He looked grave. "Well that's unfortunate, if you were planning on changing back."

I shut my eyes and breathed in through my nose. That was not at all what I wanted to hear, although it was what I expected.

"These aren't temporary wishes. The first wish, though multifaceted, is acceptably simple and undoubtedly permanent. While the 'shut up' wish may seem to indicate temporality, that isn't so. If you want a temporary wish, you need to be very specific. If this mystery person had said, 'I wish you would shut up for the rest of the day,' for instance, you would have been fine." His eyebrows furrowed and he sent me a look of sympathy. "If you need anything, just let me know. I'm here to help." The corner of his mouth turned into the hint of a smile. "Want to hear a secret?"

I hesitated before nodding my head, then glanced around to see that most of the other students had trickled into their desks.

“Even though it doesn’t always seem to be the case, most people just want to help you.” Right after the words left his mouth, the electronic bell rang. I held his gaze for a moment, then plopped down into my desk in the front row like a limp sack of corn.

Most people wanted to help me? Why had he told me that? Was that supposed to make me feel better about everything? Was he trying to restore my faith in humanity? My grandfather had once told me something similar, back when we were sitting over a fishing hole in a cozy ice shack. ‘Most folks are on your side’, he’d told me. How could that possibly be true, though, when there were assholes like Jarvis in the world?

“Hey,” the girl next to me said with a grin, disturbing my melancholic thoughts. I was pretty sure her name was Caroline. She wore expensive-looking sweaters to school every day and everything about her exuded uptightness. We were often the first two people to arrive at class, and she would start doodling in her notebook as soon as she sat down. She always took the corner seat next to me, ignoring the fact that there were plenty of unoccupied desks elsewhere. I generally tried to ignore her. I knew what she was: an annoying, entitled girl.

I gave her a nervous glance and waved my hand. I figured she was probably just trying to make fun of me. After the whole room laughed at me in History class, my faith in humankind was at an all-time low.

“I heard about what happened. Can you really not talk?”

I glared at her, then nodded and shrugged my shoulders.

“Are you still going by Joseph?”

I shook my head, and fought back a smile as I remembered the gift my Mom had given me. I pulled the round pin out of my pocket and handed it to her.

“Johanna. That’s a pretty name.” She passed back the pin. “Cute pin, too.”

Thanks. I mouthed. I lost my battle against the smile.

“It’s just so amazing...” She continued smiling, studying me closely.

I raised an eyebrow, unsure what she was getting at.

“We were learning all about wishing stones in class and reading these old texts and then \*bam\*! You actually found one. That’s so cool! School is always about theory and abstract nonsense. They try to make it more real with stupid math problems like ‘How many napkins would you need for a party if blah blah blah...’ But you actually lived it. When you found the wishing stone, you touched something real. It must have felt amazing.” Her eyes glossed over in wonder. “What are the chances?”

My smile had fled, about halfway through her little speech. What were the chances, indeed. Did she actually consider me to be lucky? I almost gagged at the thought. At least she didn’t treat me like a pile of shit, though.

We were interrupted by the beginning of another Mr. Bradley lecture. He often started a few minutes late, as he wasn't exactly the world's most organized teacher. The class flew by at a quick pace, and I spent much of the period working on my handwriting. Bradley somehow managed to keep the lecture moderately interesting, despite the fact that the lesson was about some of the most basic geodes. I wasn't able to raise my hand to answer questions or participate in the class, which left me somewhat bitter, but other students filled that void with ease. If anything, everyone in the class started participating more except for me...and their answers to his difficult questions were surprisingly almost all correct.

Bradley - ever the comedian - maintained everyone's interest by weaving in a few horribly corny jokes about the properties of different rocks.

"Why wasn't the geologist hungry? Because they lost their apatite!"

The entire class let out loud groans at Bradley's final line, just as the bell rang. Well, the entire class except for me...and I certainly would have groaned if I could. His jokes were bad, but they were nowhere near as bad as my Dad's. If anything, Dad had seasoned me for dealing with people like Bradley, whose puns were always jarring.

After clutching my backpack straps tightly to my shoulders and dodging between slow-walking students in the busy hallways like a fox, I arrived at the cafeteria. Despite my haste, it was already starting to bustle. Some of the more lenient teachers would let their classes get out early for lunch, so I seldom managed to avoid long food lines. Bradley was an easy grader, but there was no way that he would miss the opportunity to hear himself talk for a full hour.

After a few minutes of awkward waiting, I grabbed a tray and filled it with macaroni and peas, both of which looked a bit unappetizing. Rumors claimed that the same company that makes most of the country's prison food also served my high school's cafeteria. Of course, our school had opted for the cheapest plan available, which meant that I was quite literally filling my plate with food that wouldn't meet the standards of a prison.

Taking a quick survey of the cafeteria, I went to my usual seat: by myself in the corner. Nobody really liked sitting next to me anyway, so I figured that it'd just be another bleak day in my lackluster life. I was wrong.

As soon as I sat down, I noticed that everyone was staring at me. People were even turning around to look at me, before whispering amongst themselves. Aside from History, I'd gone through most of the day like a ghost. I suppose that the freedom of lunch allowed other students ample opportunity to gossip and stare, and I was possibly the most interesting disaster in the history of Cheran High. The stares only

got worse as the cafeteria filled up with students. Usually, people sat relatively close to me, but that was no longer the case. Everyone avoided me like I was a third rail, choosing to peer at me from a distance. It reminded me of those nature documentaries, where a lone seal would pursue a school of fish. The school would bend and turn in silent coordination, all to avoid the seal. I was that seal, lathered with thick repellent, although I didn't even make an attempt to sit near any of the fish.

I looked around for Caroline - if that actually was her name - but I didn't see her anywhere. She was the only student at this stupid school who'd shown me a shred of kindness, although even that seemed to be more out of fascination than admiration. I bet she was eating with the yearbook club or something. She struck me as that kind of girl.

I'd never felt so alone before, as I poked at the macaroni with my flimsy plastic spork. Every time I glanced up, people were still staring at me. Their beady eyes sized me up, judged me, and made me wonder why I'd even decided to come to school in the first place. Was I some sort of zoo animal to them?

I couldn't handle it anymore. I was too tired and shattered, so I dropped my spork and buried my face into my hands. Tears trickled down my arms and dropped into my disgusting meal. I was a freak. A fucking sideshow. I sobbed, silently.

People who wanted to become women and had access to wishing stones probably wished for reality to change as well, just to make things easier. Not so for me. Instead, I was stuck in this living hell. In all of their eyes, I'd changed my gender and made myself a tragic mute. Surely, some of them believed that it was all an accident, but they had probably heard a variety of rumors...likely all negative.

Part of me expected someone to come and comfort me, but nobody did.

I sulked through my remaining two classes. Fortunately, I didn't have P.E. so I didn't have to deal with the meathead.

When the final bell rang, I slinked out of the building and began the long walk home. On the way, I felt my phone vibrate and I checked my texts. It was rare for me to receive a text, especially one from my sister Megan.

Hey, do you need a ride home? It read. My heart raced as I contemplated my reply. She'd texted me out of the blue...but why? She never offered me rides, and only did so when Mom pestered her. Had Mom forced her to offer me a ride?

No. Already walking. I texted back. I put my phone back into my fuzzy coat and began trudging through the light layer of snow on the sidewalk. Part of me hoped that the phone would vibrate with another text, but that never happened. Instead, I braved the bitter cold alone. As I stomped along in Megan's small, old, wool-lined winter

boots, my attention was drawn to some nearby trees. They were big ones, and I had no idea what type they were. Every summer, they'd sport giant leaves and drop prickly things. Of course, their leaves had all fallen off in Autumn, and they looked like bare skeletons. They were empty and naked, withering in the cold. 'If trees could talk', I thought to myself. They'd probably be insufferable in the winter, all angry and sorrowful, mourning the loss of their precious leaf-friends.

Once I got home, I headed upstairs as quickly as I could and slammed my bedroom door, locking it behind me. I wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone after such a brutal day. My back against my door, I sunk to the carpeted floor and buried my head in my hands. In my mind, I vividly replayed the way the other kids stared at me at lunch and how they all laughed in History class. I shuddered. It was like something out of a nightmare, but it was real...it actually happened.

After a few minutes, I gathered myself and headed toward my desk. On the way, I noticed an object on my bed.

It was a plain, compact white board with a neat note written in dry-erase marker on its pristine surface.

Johanna, I saw this at the store today. I hope you like it. Love, Mom

I cracked a weak smile and sniffled. There was no way she just happened to stumble across this in the store and bought it on a whim. She went out of her way to help me, and didn't want me to think I'd caused such a bother. I didn't deserve her.

Luckily, I'd finished most of my homework during my most boring classes, so I had a good deal of free time. I sat down in front of my computer and saw that none of my friends were online yet. Armed with both Google and ambition, I decided to figure out exactly what had changed with Jarvis's wish. If there was no way I'd be able to change back, at least I could set the record straight and make sure people knew that I didn't intend to be a mute girl. Also, I'd be able to see what Jarvis' limits were and maybe orchestrate some sweet revenge...

My search immediately brought me to Saint Paul's Wikipedia page, which seemed to have been drastically altered recently. The names of Duncan family members were littered throughout the history section and one line in particular stood out to me: "The Duncan family still partially owns much of the property within the city's municipal boundaries." What the fuck? So we were almost their tenants?

None of Jarvis' family members occupied any government posts, but I guess they didn't have to...they quite literally owned the entire city, and nobody even suspected them of having used a wishing stone. The whole situation made me wonder: how many billionaires had only gotten to their level because they used a wishing stone?

How many athletes? How many countries, even? Had the King of Saudi Arabia wished for oil? There were also a handful of international laws banning the malevolent use of wishing stones, but how were those justly enforced? If a wish was sufficiently well-designed, subtle, or altered enough memories, it would be impossible to know. Either nobody would ever find out, or nobody would be able to enact justice. The latter seemed to be the case with Jarvis' wish.

Curious to see how far Duncan's wish extended, I scrolled through the Minneapolis page. Like Saint Paul's, it was tainted with the Duncan family name, although not quite as extensively. As it turned out, they held sway throughout all of Minnesota.

If people were able to alter reality like this, was anything real? I guess it had to be...the Duncans owned this whole city, and that seemed to be quite real.

Would people remember that Jarvis used to be a weakling, then? How I dropped his pants in front of all the girls, back in sixth grade? How I teased him? How I hurt him?

I paused, and gulped past a lump in my throat. I couldn't think about that. I refused to think about that. That was over, done.

Shaking my head, I refocused on more important matters: why didn't I remember the Jarvis' family as owners of the city? I'd have to ask Mr. Bradley. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that I'd been present to hear the wish.

I closed my eyes and shuddered as I recalled the terror in my eyes when Jarvis cursed me. What was the point of even trying to live if someone else's wish could ruin your life and destroy everything you once held dear? It seemed so futile. I always used to pity the hunters, the people who spent their whole lives scouring the world for wishing stones. The people who ended up as skeletons inside of locker room walls, or died while sleuthing through caves. They were often disheveled and easily mistaken for homeless people, but maybe they were the smart ones. Perhaps wishing stones were so brutally powerful that it was worthwhile to spend an entire lifetime searching for one.

Drawing a sigh and casting those thoughts from my mind, I decided to practice my two new little projects: sign language and handwriting. Sign man and handwriting lady were going to become my closest friends, it seemed.

I had been at it for an hour or two, alternating between practice sessions, when I heard a knock on my door.

"Come in," I said instinctively before shaking my head and laughing.

"Hello? Are you in there?" My sister's voice called, as the door crept open.

"Hey," she said uneasily when she saw me sitting at my desk.

I mouthed Hi in return.

“So...” she began, biting her lip. “I read your letter,” her voice began to tremble ever so slightly, “and I’m sorry about what I said yesterday. You didn’t deserve that. That was a really fucked up thing for me to do, and I...I don’t know, I was just surprised and selfish and...I really am sorry.”

Thanks, I mouthed. With that, I walked over to my bed and picked up my new whiteboard. It was about the size of an iPad, and I was considering bringing it to school tomorrow.

Megan looked intrigued, peering over my shoulder as I started to write a message on the board.

I meant everything I wrote. I think I deserve this.

She shook her head and turned me to face her, sitting on my bed beside me. Without saying anything more, she pulled me into a tight hug. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d hugged her. Years ago, at least...if ever. What had gotten into her? Did Mom threaten her or something? Maybe she actually did regret how she treated me...I was still wary of her apparent change of heart, though. She’d hurt me when she literally spat in my face, and I wasn’t going to forgive that quickly. Plus, she’d treated me like shit my entire life.

“You’re so tiny!” Megan giggled.

That earned her a glare. She just had to lord it over me, didn’t she? She was loving this shit. I wanted to lash out at her, to give her an insult that cut to the bone and made her cry, but...no. I drew a deep breath. No. If I did strike back, what would that change? I’d get my two seconds of pleasure, of pride, but what would come next? I’d still be morose, I’d still be lonely, and it would all be my own damned fault.

Megan wasn’t wrong, either. I used to be a few inches taller than her, but now I was a good 4 or 5 inches shorter. There wasn’t too much meat on my bones, either. She wasn’t overweight herself, she was actually quite thin for her height, but she still probably could have suffocated me if she wished.

So, instead, I just kept my mouth shut.

“To be honest, I always wanted a little sister,” she admitted with a grin.

Really? I mouthed back, raising a suspicious eyebrow.

“Yeah. I guess you’re a bit too old to play dress-up with, but...how would you like to go shopping with me this weekend? So you don’t have to be stuck with all my hand-me-downs. Don’t worry, I’ll pay for everything. It’ll be my treat, okay?” Her eyes pleaded with me, begging me to accept her offer. Either Mom was threatening her with something serious or she actually felt badly.



I nodded my head in wary shock. Why was she being so nice to me? I guess money didn't mean quite as much to her, since she did modeling work on the side and got paid decently well for it. For a hermit like me, though, money was a luxury earned from birthday cards and parental begging. Regardless, I often ended up spending most of my money on gaming hardware and Steam sales.

"Cool," she said as she ran a hand through my hair, causing me to tense up nervously. Was she going to hurt me? "Also, I saw you at lunch. Tomorrow, you can sit with me if you want. You don't have to be such a little loner."

I nodded once more, before wiping the white board clean with my sleeve and writing, Everyone was staring at me. All day.

Megan looked at me like I was an idiot. "No shit. That's because you're fucking gorgeous and they haven't seen you before."

Really? I asked again in suspicious disbelief. It was best to keep words simple when mouthing, and I was starting to find myself using the same few words quite often.

"Really?" She mocked me. "Have you looked in the mirror?"

I nodded. I was admittedly very attractive, although that probably wasn't the sole reason why people stared at me.

"You know, you've got a lot to learn."

I know I mouthed, but she wasn't looking at my mouth. Instead, she was eyeing my outfit.

"You what?"

I know I repeated, clenching my jaw.

"Oh, good. Did Mom pick out your outfit for today?"

I nodded. How did she know?

"Figures. What are you going to wear tomorrow?"

I hesitated, then headed to my dresser. I hadn't exactly thought it through before, so I pulled out a plaid scarf, a long-sleeve white shirt, a plaid coat, black jeans, and the same pair of fur boots. It was the least girly winter outfit in my tiny collection.

"Are you joking? I will not let you walk out of this house wearing that. The plaid patterns are clashing so hard..." She closed her eyes and shook her head.

"Geez, you're like a helpless baby deer."

I looked up at her blankly. Baby deer were known as fawns, but I didn't correct her. I didn't have the means nor the motivation. Part of the reason people disliked me was because I corrected them like that. I was such a know-it-all...what the fuck was wrong with me?

“The top is okay, the scarf is okay, the pants are okay...” She bit her lip as she foraged through my drawers. “This, this, and this.” She said, tossing me a white wool coat, a fuzzy white beanie, and a pair of high, brown leather boots. Turning them over in my hands, I noted that the boots had tiny heels to them, an inch or so.

Megan noticed my hesitation: “Don’t worry. You’ll get used to it. It’s really not that hard to walk in them. Plus, I’ll drive you.”

I paused. Why was I letting Megan make fashion decisions for me? I stared at her for a moment, then eyed my five pairs of shoes. The boots that she had chosen were some of the most mild, despite the tiny heel.

Thanks, I eventually mouthed. I put my clothes down in a neatly folded pile, turned around, and gave her another brief hug.

Sitting down on my bed, I was both incredibly happy and sad. I didn’t know how to feel. Everyone stared at me all day and people laughed at me...but my sister had been nice to me. For the first time in my life, she willingly spent time with me...or, at least, I suspected that she did it willingly. The mere thought made me warm inside. She might actually care about me.

# CHAPTER 7

## *The Elegant Tortoise, Part 1*

**B***EEP BEEP BEEP.*  
Wednesday. For me, Wednesday meant one thing: Physical Education. P  
fucking E. Ever since his unholy growth spurt, Jarvis had made my life  
difficult during P.E. but I'd always been able to fight back, either physically or verbally.  
Of course, that was no longer the case. Now, I would be entirely at his mercy. The mere  
thought made me shiver. He was an absolute idiot, but he was gigantic, and he'd  
already proven that his dullness could cause irreparable harm. Why did P.E. have to be  
a co-ed class? Whose brilliant idea had that been?

I groaned quietly and rolled out of bed, then walked into my bathroom like a zombie.  
I took a quick shower, and tried to keep my hair dry during the process, which wasn't  
as easy as it sounded. There was no way that I'd have enough time to dry my long black  
hair, so my options were limited. Sure enough, Mom was already calling for me to  
come down for breakfast before the water even turned hot.

Grudgingly, I left the shower. Mom kept pestering me from downstairs, as per usual,  
so I quickly dried myself and donned the clothing that Megan had picked out for me. I  
had no time to be making clothing decisions, and - according to Megan - I had  
absolutely no sense of fashion, so it might have been for the best.

I considered dashing down the stairs to breakfast, but then I caught a glimpse of my  
hair in the mirror. It was an absolute disaster. Worse than a disaster. I looked like I'd  
been born and raised in a gutter. I sighed, then pulled out the brush. I had no plans to  
wear makeup or style my hair. I didn't really see the point, as I looked fine without that  
stuff. However, I was willing to do the bare minimum to make myself look like a sane  
human being, so I worked the brush through my knotted locks.

As I brushed, a thought skipped through my mind: I hadn't actually played any video games last night, had I? I couldn't remember the last time I'd gone a whole day without playing any games...then again, I couldn't recall the last time Megan had actually spent time with me. It seemed as if the whole world had turned upside down over the course of two days.

I glanced in the mirror before heading downstairs, and made a few silly expressions. The snug white beanie and the scarf looked really nice on me. I couldn't help but grin.

My smile faded when I started to put on the boots that Megan had wanted me to wear. They went almost all the way up to my knees, but that didn't bother me at all compared to the tiny heel. I practiced walking around my room in them a little bit. I was nervous at first, putting one foot uneasily ahead of the other and holding my breath in suspense. However, I managed to pace without stumbling. I didn't even have to walk much more slowly than usual, and the boots were surprisingly snug and comfortable. I suppose I'd survive the day.

Inspecting my reflection one last time, I smiled and said: "Hey, I'm Johanna." Again, my smile gradually faded when no words came out of my mouth. What would my voice sound like, if I could speak? It'd probably be sweet and cheery. I closed my eyes. What had my voice sounded like in those few seconds before Jarvis made his final wish? I could barely recall. That memory was already growing distant, although it had only happened a couple days ago. I guess I had a lot going on with my life. Shaking my head, I carefully walked down the stairs in my heeled boots like a tortoise - an elegant tortoise.

"Good morning, sweetie," Mom called out from the kitchen. "It's your lucky day! Your sister got up early and helped me cook some pancakes, just for you. You know, it's about time you started cooking breakfast, too."

I groaned quietly and rolled my eyes. That was a classic Mom line, right there. Vintage Mom. First, she'd compare me to Megan unfavorably, and then she'd weave in an indirect accusation of laziness. However, this was the first time she'd specifically requested that I help her cook breakfast. Thanks, I mouthed with a sniff. Mom wasn't watching my lips, so she probably didn't even see my reply. I sighed, then took a seat and dug into one of the syrup-laden pancakes.

"I'll wake you up tomorrow so we can cook together, and you'll have to get your butt in gear. No slouching around, alright?" Mom glanced at me for a response, but I just frowned and ignored her. I had zero interest in helping her cook breakfast. I had plenty of better things to do with my time, such as...well...maybe I didn't. But I still didn't want to cook.

Across the table, Megan failed to contain a giggle. "Aww. You're so cute when you're pouty. You poor thing."

With that, she earned herself a death glare. Unfortunately, that only made her laugh harder. I wasn't used to being teased without being able to retort. Hell, I'd never be able to fight back again in my whole life, physically or otherwise. I was weak and defenceless, by almost every definition. I'd never be able to hold a casual conversation ever again. I couldn't even participate in class. How was I going to get through college? How was I ever going to get a job? Live a normal life? That train of thought caused a few tears to well in my eyes, which I tried to wipe away as quickly as I could. Instead, I ended up burying my face into the elbow of my coat and bawling. As I did, I realized that my sniffles were still faintly audible. Great, the one actual noise I could make with my mouth or nose was only able to be heard when I was crying. That realization only made me cry harder.

"Hey, hey, hey. Cheer up. Being cute isn't a bad thing." Megan said. Her tone was that of a vocalized eyeroll. Did she even really care about me, or was I just a plaything to her? As she spoke, I felt a pair of hands - Mom's, probably - rest on my shoulders protectively.

"What did we just talk about?" Mom hissed at Megan, in a stern tone that demanded obedience. "Your his...her...her big sister. At least try to make her feel comfortable."

"Sorry," Megan muttered. "How was I supposed to know she'd take it like that? Most people would be flattered..."

I let out an exhausted sigh, then looked up toward both of them, my nose still running and my eyes probably a bit puffy.

It's not because of that, I mouthed at them, shaking my head.

"Where?" Mom asked. She misunderstood my words so profoundly that I couldn't even guide her in the correct direction.

It's not because of that!

"There's a...cat?" Megan tried, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear.

IT'S. NOT. BECAUSE. OF. THAT! I shouted soundlessly. My jaw trembled, and I had to take a few deep breaths to harness my anger. Nothing in my life was going to be easy ever again.

"It's not about...that?" Mom finally asked.

I nodded, defeated. Close enough. At least Mom finally understood the general point that I was trying to make.

"What is it, then? What's on your mind, hun?" Mom asked.

Everything, I replied with exasperation. Shaking my head, I fought back the urge to snarl.

Mom's voice arrived in a calming tone, just above a whisper: "I can't imagine what you're going through." She paused, likely to exchange a glance with Megan. "Neither of us can understand how you're feeling, but I do know something about you, sweetie. You're smart, you're strong, and you...can be a very kind person. You're going to be alright. You'll get through this, trust me." Mom rubbed my shoulders in deep circles. "One day at a time, and everything will get easier."

I wasn't sure if it was her soothing words or her deep massage, but my tension and frustration vanished in a matter of moments. What the hell was I doing? Sulking around and being in such a pissy mood. I did that most of the time as Joseph, but did I want to be that person anymore? Did I even have a choice? When dealing with Megan and Mom after my...changes, I'd tried acting friendly, but was that the real me? Was that kindness just a mask that I managed to wear from time to time, to hide my true, ugly self? I honestly wasn't sure, but there was no harm in trying to be nicer, was there?

I nodded apprehensively and started to collect myself. Mom, as per usual, was right. I shouldn't focus on the negative. Positive thoughts, Johanna. Think positive thoughts. Even if I was really a negative asshole underneath, I'd have to try my best to put on a smile. In a lot of ways, I was beyond lucky. I had a family that actually loved me and my whole life ahead of me, although sometimes it was easy to forget about those comforting facts.

\* \* \*

I was almost shaking as I walked toward the P.E. locker room. A juvenile wish ran through my mind: I wish Dad was here with me. Obviously it was a silly thought, but I'd never been so terrified before. Physical Education. In other words, an inevitable encounter with a boy who outweighed me by over 100 pounds and hated my guts.

Thankfully, the school had decided to let me change in the girls' room. I guess that made more sense than forcing me to change in the boys'. I couldn't imagine trying to change in the boy's locker room with my body looking like this. A knot developed in my throat at the mere thought.

Walking into the girls' locker room, I quickly realized that my preconceptions had been deeply flawed. It wasn't going to be a very welcoming environment.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing here?” A blonde-haired girl asked, putting extra emphasis on the ‘u’ in ‘fuck’.

Her name was Tina, and - like Jarvis - she’d gone to Junior High with me. She’d had one of those terrible ‘braces with headgear’ setups, which made all of her words come out in a slurring lisp. She’d been fun to mess with, and I made a funny image by juxtaposing her school picture with the definition of ‘nerd’, taken from the dictionary. The other students loved that. However, things had changed a lot, since then. Tina’s teeth no longer required headgear, and she’d grown into her big ears. She’d become one of the relatively popular girls, and led a small clique. Gah...how had people like her risen so high, while I lost so many old friends?

Since freshman year, Tina had become pretty snooty. I didn’t talk to her much, but when I did, she acted like the kind of girl who’d never heard the word ‘No’ in her whole life. She and her friends would probably have been cheerleaders, if not for the fact that cheerleading was an actual commitment that required discipline - at least, that was what my sister had insisted while she drove me to school in the morning. Megan had also urged me to watch her cheerleading practice, but I’d opted out. I had better things to do with my day than watch girls dance around in skimpy outfits, especially when those girls didn’t seem to turn me on anymore. That felt like adding insult to injury.

Unsure how to react to Tina’s vicious comment, I simply shrugged and began to walk around her. I really didn’t want to deal with a confrontation, today. Or any other day, if I was going to be a weakling with no voice. My heart began to race with panic as I fully digested her words, and her stature. She wasn’t too tall, but she still towered over me and I felt more than a little intimidated. Two of her friends flanked her on either side, which was very unnecessary. I had no doubt that Tina could beat me up without their help.

As I feared, she didn’t let me pass by to my gym locker, and instead pinned me up against one of the lockers. I let out a tiny gasp, as her elbow pressed into my lower back. I tried to struggle out of her grasp, but it was hopeless. I wanted to cry out for help as she pressed two fingers against my stomach and started to push in with all of her strength, but of course I couldn’t. I never imagined two fingers pressing into my abdomen could be so painful, but it was. She pressed deeper and deeper until tears started to well in my eyes.

“You deserve this,” Tina whispered in my ear. She pushed harder, and I bared my teeth. “Worse than this, actually.”

Please stop I mouthed.

Looking around in desperation, I saw that a lot of girls had gathered around, but none of them seemed eager to help me. “Just leave her alone,” and “Grow up, Tina,” I heard a couple girls say, but none of them actually intervened. Most simply looked on with expressions of uncertainty or pity, as if they weren’t entirely sure if I deserved to be sharing a locker with them. I suppose it made some degree of sense, though. From their perspective, I was some pervert who wished this upon myself. With that thought, I let my tears run freely down my cheek. I didn’t even want this! I screamed wordlessly, as Tina continued to poke away at my organs.

“What’s going on in here?” Coach Tiller, the men's basketball coach, demanded with an authoritative voice. He parted the crowd and approached us. Apparently, one of the more kind-hearted girls who had seen Tina’s ambush and fetched the coach. His brown hair was cloaked beneath the baseball cap he often wore, with long, dark, sideburns stretching down from the hat’s blue sides. Beneath the cap, he wore a perpetual scowl. As the whole school knew, Tiller wasn’t to be trifled with. Although he had every right to be in the locker room in order to break up the scuffle, he was clearly uncomfortable. This wasn’t his domain, and he was careful to keep his eyes trained on Tina and I. Fortunately for him, none of the other girls were in the process of dressing themselves. The spectacle of Tina’s bitchiness had drawn everyone’s attention.

“Fucking freak,” Tina whispered in my ear, releasing me from her hold and removing her poking finger.

“Nothing, we were just talking,” Tina told Coach brightly, with devious eyes. On her face, she wore the most innocent smile she could muster.

“That’s not what it looked like to me.” Coach turned to me. His stern face exuded authority, with the golden, wrinkled skin of someone who spent every day sunbathing and pronounced lines around the edges of his eyes. With a weary sigh, he glanced down at the clipboard in his hand, squinting to read his own scrawl. “...Johanna Larsen?” Even back when I was Joseph, I doubted that he ever knew my name. He didn’t seem to be the sentimental type, or the kind of person who enjoyed dealing with students who weren’t his athletes. After all, his passion was for coaching basketball, not looking after people like me. Hell, I didn’t even want to take P.E. in the first place, and stupid school rules were the only reason our paths had crossed. For some reason, the school required coaches to teach a few classes. There was no doubt in my mind that Coach Tiller would have opted out of P.E. if he were qualified to teach any other subjects.



I nodded slowly in affirmation, still shaken. My name was indeed Johanna Larsen. My Dad had made sure of that when he filed all sorts of paperwork the other day. I had no idea what that process entailed, but the fact that I hadn't seen much of him in the last couple days made me wonder if he was busy filling out paperwork for me. Either that, or...or he didn't want to see me.

"Were you two 'just talking'?" Coach Tiller asked with furrowed eyebrows, clearly doubtful of Tina's claim.

I shook my head No. I wasn't usually a snitch, but I definitely couldn't deal with Tina and her gang by myself. I needed someone to help me. There, I said it. I needed someone to be on my side. Someone to make sure that all of the world's assholes like Tina would just leave me alone. As soon as Coach Tiller turned to Tina with a look of disdain on his face, I knew I'd made the right decision. My heart rose and I fought to contain a faint smile. Justice was about to be served, swiftly and soundly.

"That's just about what I figured. Tina, you're going to be spending the next week in detention," Coach declared, as all of the other girls eavesdropped on the sentencing. His words fell upon the locker room like a gavel, and my faint grin became increasingly opaque.

"Are you sure you want to do that, Coach?" Tina pursed her lips and raised a blonde eyebrow. "You know, my Dad golfs with Mr. Duncan. It'd be a real shame if you lost your job over one stupid...mistake." She sneered at me as she said the last word. Great, another asshole covered by Jarvis' blanket immunity from any sort of punishment or criticism.

Coach's eyes went wide with fear at the mere mention of 'Mr. Duncan,' and my grin was replaced with a sharp glare. What the hell? Was he really going to let her boss him around?

"You know, it's awfully rude for you to just run in and watch all of us changing. Mr. Duncan wouldn't be happy to hear about that." She gave a melodramatic mock-sigh and looked down on me as if I was a cockroach.

"Trust me, you don't want to lose your job sticking up for this...thing."

A thing. She'd called me a 'thing,' and she hadn't used that word endearingly. Instead, there was a bitter edge to her voice that made goosebumps run up my arms.

"Get changed, both of you," Coach Tiller said, turning and walking away. I clenched my jaw. What was wrong with people in this stupid city? Was Duncan's wish really that powerful? I'd never taken Coach Tiller for the spineless type.

I avoided making eye contact with Tina and tried to ignore her gloating smile as I dashed to the back corner of the locker room and started to change. There was no

doubt in my mind that all of the other girls were staring at me while I changed, so I tried to be as quick as possible. They were probably wondering all sorts of things, like whether or not I was actually a girl. Did they all hate me like Tina, or was that just her? Either way, they were certainly all interested in staring at me. Everyone was, in this stupid fucking school.

The girls' P.E. uniform was similar to the boy's, but I couldn't help but notice that my green gym shorts were both shorter and tighter than usual. I took a sigh and shook my head. This was going to be a living hell.

By the time I walked out onto the basketball court, I'd almost forgotten about the fact that Jarvis was also in this class...until I felt a big hand slap down on my shoulder.

I jumped and let out a silent squeal, spinning around to see Jarvis's stupid grin.

"I like you better like this," he slowly declared. Then, he drew me into a big, long hug. His bulking body made me feel like an ant, and I wheezed for breath.

Let me go! I demanded, pounding against his stomach. It was all futile, though. My head was right near his chest and there was no way he could see my mouth from that angle.

"You know, I didn't do the wishes on purpose, but I'm glad I did them. You were real mean."

I scowled, then stomped on his foot. He didn't even seem to notice.

He let me go and I took a few nervous steps back. I crossed my arms under my breasts and realized that my whole body was trembling.

"Remember when you called me 'Squeaky'?" he asked, then chuckled slowly and stupidly. Squeaky? That was ages ago...three years ago, at least, and it hadn't been that big of a deal. How was that even relevant? Honestly, I was surprised that Jarvis's memory even went back that far. "I think you'd be 'Squeaky' now, if you could squeak. You're so tiny."

His stupidity only served to make me angrier. Me, Joseph - Johanna - fucking Larsen. I thought I was such a genius, yet I'd gotten completely played and my life had been utterly destroyed by the dumbest person I'd ever met. There was a bitter irony to it, the kind that stung my soul.

Luckily, the shrill call of Coach Tiller's whistle drew Jarvis' attention away from me.

We all gathered into a cluster, and I was both peeved and embarrassed to find that no other girls chose to stand near me. Were they afraid that they would get on Tina's bad side? Speaking of Tina, she immediately pranced to Jarvis' side and clung to him like a succubus. Yeah, a succubus. That was the perfect description. I wouldn't be shocked to find that she had razor-sharp teeth beneath her blonde hair. On second

thought, that was impossible. Tina wasn't pretty enough to be a succubus. She wasn't bad-looking, but I blew her out of the water in the looks department. Maybe she just had a serious case of jealousy. Hell, I hoped she didn't consider me to be some sort of competition for Jarvis' affection. How would she have even gotten that idea? Maybe Jarvis was talking about me and she caught wind of it...I gagged at the mere thought.

As I continued attempting to read Tina's mind, Tiller ordered us to pick teams to play a quick four-team basketball tournament. A few of the guys let out disgruntled groans, of course. Tiller had us play basketball almost every class session, probably because it was the only sport that he knew well. He lived basketball, breathed basketball, and figured that everyone else should, too. It wasn't the worst possible sport for me. I'd been a poor basketball player, and that was before I'd lost over half a foot in height and all of my muscle mass. I was still taller than a good portion of the girls in the class, but I expected to be one of the last people selected.

The captains were two girls and two boys who I didn't know, and I was shocked when one of the guys chose me as their second pick. Was he insane? Maybe...although I did notice a pattern. The male captains generally picked pretty girls whereas the girl captains picked jocks. So I had been chosen to be eye candy? Wonderful. I suppose it was better than people considering me to be a non-human. I really couldn't complain.

Jarvis was - of course - the first person picked in the draft, and he seemed awfully happy with himself. The captain probably only picked him out of fear of retribution. Fear filled everyone's eyes when they looked at Jarvis, except for Tina's, of course. Hers were filled with the devious glint of opportunity. Studying the two of them, I came to the conclusion that my initial impression was correct: Tina had only tormented me in the locker room to gain favor with Jarvis. How pathetic.

Regardless, I was glad that Jarvis wasn't on my team and I didn't look forward to playing against him. I wasn't sure if he hated me or if he had some sort of bizarre crush on me, but I seriously hoped it wasn't the latter. However, it definitely wasn't normal to hug someone like he'd hugged me.

Unsurprisingly, I played like shit. The ball seemed so much bigger than it was before and my hand-eye coordination had taken a bit of a hit. I struggled to even dribble. I had to use all of my strength just to get a weak shot off, and I felt a bit guilty when our team got eviscerated in consecutive games. My stomach dropped with dread every time I received the ball, but quickly found that the people on the opposing teams tried to be gentle while guarding me. They still stole the ball from me most of the time, but none of my bones were crushed. Luckily, the crappiness of our team meant we never

had to play Jarvis' team, as they went undefeated. Silver linings, I thought to myself. Silver linings.

\* \* \*

At lunch, Megan flagged me down and I went to sit next to her. I walked as carefully as I possibly could. Wearing those tiny-heeled boots, I knew that it only took one misstep to send my tray flying. If that happened, I'd never live it down. I'd be forever known as the girl who couldn't manage to walk properly without embarrassing herself.

All of Megan's friends were sitting around her, eating their prison food and chatting happily amongst themselves. I was fairly sure that they were all cheerleaders and most of them were juniors and seniors, so I was a bit nervous when I slid my tray onto the table.

"This is my sister Johanna," she introduced me with an apprehensive glance, as if she wasn't trusting that I'd make a good impression. From her eyes, I knew she still thought of me as an embarrassment, despite the sweet words we'd shared the night before. She didn't mention that I couldn't talk, but they probably already knew of my ailment. I imagine that they had talked about me a lot yesterday.

I waved at the girls uneasily before turning my attention to my food. Sitting alone had been a terrible experience, but this wasn't much better, surrounded by people who I'd never met. Truth be told, I just wanted to be invisible.

My appetite wasn't as big as it once was, and the odorless lump that masqueraded as 'food' was even worse than usual. I ended up just picking it up with my fork and inspecting it, praying that the lunch period would come to an end.

"Hey, I'm Sarah...I think we've met before. How've you been doing?" The girl sitting beside me asked awkwardly. I was fairly certain that she was the captain of the cheerleading team. She absolutely looked the part, with bouncy blonde hair and a smile that could charm a pit viper. She'd been my sister's friend for a number of years, but I'd never actually talked to her much. I was just the annoying little brother that they avoided at all costs. I still vividly remembered a few years ago, when Megan and Sarah had been blasting music during a sleepover and they shooed me out of Megan's room when I tried to turn off the stereo.

I mustered a cautious smile for her and then dug into my backpack, pulling out my whiteboard. Shitty, I wrote the letters carefully with my dry-erase marker. My handwriting was improving rapidly, and my chest swelled with pride as I examined

the finished product. I was a quick learner when I dedicated myself to a cause, and the cause of being well-understood was a motivating one.

Sarah glanced over my shoulder to see what I'd written. "Sorry to hear that." She blushed, realizing that she hadn't actually 'heard' anything. "You know what I mean...just...sorry. What's it like? Changing teams and all?" She asked the question rapidly, as if she had been preparing to ask me for a while.

It's different. I like some parts of it. Not all, though- I was frustrated to find that I'd run out of space on my whiteboard before I was able to finish the sentence. I'd have to work on that.

Sarah must have thought it was cute, because she gave a shrill laugh full of rich energy, which caused me to crack a genuine smile. She had an infectious laugh. She was just so...perfect. I'd admired her when I was growing up. Not in a sexual way, though. I'd tried to make her seem more attractive, in my mind. I'd tried to force myself into lusting after her, but I'd never managed it. My admiration for her had always been of the 'I wish my life was as easy as hers' variety.

Shit.

I was into dudes. I'd...I'd always been into dudes, and it was pointless to pretend otherwise. I'd been through too much bullshit to care. As far as brutal developments in my life went, this was far from the worst. Attraction to men wasn't great, but, as much as I'd tried to deny it, it had always been a part of me. I'd kept it down, suppressed beneath a layer of anger, but now it seemed so inconsequential. It was far from the largest burden I'd have to bear. Hell, I'd probably never be in a relationship, so my orientation was a moot point. Why would anyone - man or woman - even want to date someone who couldn't speak?

"Megan says you wanted to go shopping with us this weekend?"

I winced, then nodded. For better or for worse, I had indeed accepted Megan's offer.

"You don't have your ears pierced, do you?" She smiled deviously, turning to look around the table. I hadn't noticed before, but all of the other girls were listening in on our conversation.

I shook my head No, tucking my hair behind my ear and biting my lip nervously.

The cheerleaders started giggling. "You never told us she was such a cutie," one of them said to my sister, as if I couldn't hear her. "She's like a kitten!" I didn't know how to feel about that comment, so I just tried to ignore it.

"Trust me, it barely hurts at all," Sarah reassured me. "Just a little sting and that's it. It'll be fun."

I don't know, I shrugged, unsure. On the one hand, I had zero interest in wearing jewelry, and I had my doubts about the process 'barely hurting at all'. On the other, if I was going to be a girl, I guess it made sense to get my ears pierced.

I was the focal point of most of the conversation among Megan's friend group for the rest of lunch. I felt like I was a zoo animal, and they all watched me out of amusement. It was almost as if because I wasn't able to speak, they didn't consider me entirely human. Although, it was nice that they thought I was cute and didn't consider me to be some sort of freak, like that Tina bitch.

One of Megan's friends asked me about the details of the wish, but I tried to keep my answer as vague as possible and just told her that it was an accident. I was sure that the school was swirling with dozens of rumors about exactly how my wishing stone incident went so wrong. Maybe if I could explain the truth to Tina, she would stop bothering me...if I could explain that I didn't want any of this. Probably not, I decided. Jarvis may have already told her how the wishes happened...and Tina had made up her mind, long ago.

# CHAPTER 8

## *The Elegant Tortoise, Part 2*

**M**ath was okay, but my mind kept wandering to thoughts of myself, my life, and what the future held for me. I wasn't able to contribute to class discussions or answer questions anymore, which sort've peeved me. I used to my raise my hand for every question in every class - even if I wasn't positive that my answer was correct. I used to figure that my educated guesses were probably better than most students' answers, and I felt a compulsion to outcompete them. It'd never occurred to me before, but I was beginning to realize that I did those things out of insecurity. I was so concerned with reaffirming my intelligence - to both myself and others - that I gave off the vibe of a self-centered asshole. I'd hurt people, in the past, both emotionally and physically. That wasn't my true self, though...was it?

After sitting through a handful of classes without the ability to speak, I was starting to realize that the other students weren't quite as stupid as I thought. I'd just never taken the opportunity to actually listen to them. Instead, I had chosen to bury my head in the sand like an...ostrich, and I'd treated other people like shit. Shaking my head, I made a silent oath to never let myself act like that again. Even if I somehow found a Loras Stone and got my voice back, I'd never let myself fall down that slope again. I'd listen more to other people, or at least give it my best effort.

Would I restored my voice, if I managed to come across a Loras Stone? I suppose so...using a Loras Stone to reverse the other two wishes seemed like a waste, didn't it? Acquiring a Loras Stone at all was a long shot, and admittedly silly to even fantasize about...but I spent the remainder of Math contemplating which of the three wishes I'd reverse.

By the time the bell rang, my decision was clear. I'd definitely choose to get my voice back. I could always move out of the city for college if I wanted to avoid the impact of Jarvis' third selfish wish. As far as being a girl, it really wasn't as bad as I initially thought it would be. Aside from the fact that people stared at me and called me a freak, I was almost starting to enjoy certain parts of being a girl. Brushing my long hair was oddly soothing, and I no longer had to worry about shaving the fuzz above my lip. My gaming ability didn't seem to be negatively impacted by my gender, either, which was honestly one of the most critical factors. I didn't love it, and I refused to wear makeup or over-the-top feminine clothing, but I didn't despise this body. I could live with it.

\* \* \*

When I walked into History class, excitement lingered in the air. Everyone was still thrilled that our test had been cancelled, and we were eagerly awaiting our role assignments for the Genghis Khan mock trial. Apparently mock trials were in vogue, because this was the third one I'd participated in since the start of high school. They were usually pretty fun, although this particular trial sounded intense. An entire week of class time was dedicated to this exhibition, after all, and Mrs. Peterson's class was beyond difficult.

"Alright!" Mrs. Peterson greeted us with a spring in her step, her auburn hair bouncing like a tangled bale of hay as she walked. "I've got the list of names and roles right here. They were generated randomly, and you're stuck with what you get. No trades or swaps, and absolutely no shenanigans. You'll be graded on how well you fulfil your role, as described in the grading rubric."

As she spoke, she handed a stack of white papers to a student in the front row. The papers were passed around the room, and proved to be the aforementioned grading rubric, broken down based on role assignment. A pang of worry caused my heart to race when I saw that most of the gradable categories had to do with public speaking. In fact, the only role that didn't require public speaking was the jurors'. "Costumes are encouraged, as are creativity, strong arguments, and historical accuracy. The prosecution will be arguing that Genghis Khan had a net negative impact on the world, while the defence will argue the opposite."

She started by listing off the people who would be jurors, probably the easiest job. I crossed my fingers hoping I'd be chosen as a juror. If I was a juror, all I'd have to do was cast a vote and write a paper or two. I wouldn't even need to get up in front of the class. Of course, I wasn't selected.



Next were the witnesses for prosecution, witnesses for defence, and the judge. I got increasingly nervous when my name still hadn't been called. She was already naming off lawyers for the prosecution and I hoped that there was another category after lawyers. Hopefully she forgot about me, and she'd retroactively assign me to the jury. Of course, that turned out to be wishful thinking.

"Lawyers for Defence: Clark and...Johanna," She concluded on an uncertain note. A couple of the more immature students snickered. In another brutal act of karma, I ended up in the role that suited me worst. Deep down, I'd anticipated this. Although the process was supposedly 'random,' I gave Mrs. Peterson the most scathing glare I could muster, and her face flashed with guilt. She took a breath and I knew she was contemplating whether to reassign me or not, but ultimately decided against it.

Defence, undoubtedly the more difficult side, was going to be represented by a fucking jock and myself - everyone's favorite mute. It was so comically tragic that it hurt. I had to help defend someone who murdered countless millions of people in a live trial without being able to speak, and I'd be graded on my ability to do so. Fantastic.

I took a deep breath to slow my racing heart and started to rub my eraser against my desk with a shaky hand, eliminating a dark smudge on the light wooden surface. Ever since I was a kid, I found solace in erasers when facing difficulties at school. Erasers were oddly therapeutic, and my rhythmically rubbing of this particular eraser took my mind off of yet another frustration in my life. After the dark smudge disappeared, I continued moving the eraser back and forth against the wood, my eyes closed tightly.

"Okay, I'm going to give you all the rest of the class to strategize and do your research. By the end of the week, witnesses should have a good idea of what roles they are going to portray, complete with backstories. Jurors and Judge, your assignment is to write up a 3 page essay on the impact of the Mongols and your take on their conquests - due Monday. You'll also be accountable for a 5 page review of the trial at the end of next week." Everyone who wasn't a juror or judge celebrated. I guess their roles weren't as great as they thought. Apparently, they hadn't read the rubric very closely.

"Hey," A voice spoke from in front of me, causing my eyes to flutter open. "Whatcha doing there?" Clark, the jock and fellow defence lawyer, asked as he turned his chair around to face me. He gestured toward my pink eraser, which I continued to rub against my desk. At this point, at least half of the eraser had been whittled down to a dull nub. I didn't do that with erasers too often...just when I was under a lot of stress.

I blushed slightly, dropping the eraser as if it were made of fire and brushing the shavings off of my hand. Nothing, I mouthed, hoping that he would understand the word. Hi, I added with a quick wave and a faint smile.

“Are you alright?” He asked with concern, glancing down at the eraser once more. Great. Now he thought I was some sort of weirdo because of my eraser habit. It wasn’t that weird, was it?

I made a concerted effort not to glare at him, and instead nodded my head. Everyone thought I was a freak, it seemed. A loser, a pervert, and a piece of shit asshole who had an obsession with erasers. What was the point in fighting it? I’d never win. Maybe they were right...maybe there was something seriously wrong with me.

Clark held silent eye contact with me for a little longer than I expected, as if he was in some sort of trance. I felt odd with him sitting so closely to me, his chair pulled up so that we were sharing a desk. Since my change, I hadn’t been this close to another guy...well...except for Jarvis. My face soured at the mere thought of that giant asshole.

With the subtlest of coughs, Clark broke the tension: “Well, let’s dive into it. Genghis Khan, maybe not the best guy ever...but we’ll have to see what we can do.” He cracked a cute smile, and I couldn’t help but let out a silent laugh, which caused his smile to grow larger yet. His joke wasn’t even that funny, was it? Why did I laugh? That would surely just encourage him to make even more dumb jokes.

“I was thinking that the only way we’ll be able to win this is if we take a really wide view and argue that his actions might not have been the best, but that they were really for the greater good. We’ll have to focus on the spread of technology, granting of religious freedom and other byproducts.” His eyes lit up as he continued to speak, and my jaw hung barely open. I’d been thinking the exact same thing, and I didn’t think that any of those words would come out of the mouth of a jock like him.

I was utterly speechless, staring at him with my mouth ajar. He was handsome, smart, and athletic...he was so much better than me in every way. I’d spent my whole life priding myself on my intelligence, but he seemed to be just as insightful as me...and he was seemingly superior to me in every other category. I had no idea how to feel about that. Was I useless? Was I really just bad at everything? Was I even as smart as I thought I was? Maybe I just had average intelligence this whole time, and didn’t even realize it because I never actually listened to what other people had to say. Unconsciously, I wrapped my small hands around the eraser once more and started to drag it across my desk.

A hot chick. What the hell was wrong with Jarvis? No normal person would have said that, and it only made sense in his tiny pea-sized brain.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” He asked once more, raising an eyebrow.

I nodded slowly. Dropping the eraser, I pulled out my whiteboard with trembling hands. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, refocusing myself and banishing those dark thoughts from my mind. I wasn’t useless. I definitely wasn’t useless. I couldn’t let myself think like that. Like sands trickling down an hourglass, those thoughts gradually subsided. I began forming a response while Clark waited in pensive silence, studying me carefully as I handled my whiteboard.

In tiny letters, I wrote: They’re going to try to bring up all sorts of gruesome killings and cite horrible statistics. We’ll have to find stats of our own on technological progress to counter. Fortunately, the whole note fit nice and tidy on the whiteboard, without an inch of space remaining. I failed to hold back a small, proud smile.

“Right, yeah. Do you want to be in charge of the researching? I’ll do the...talking...and stuff.” He gulped as he finished his sentence and avoided my gaze, as if he was afraid of offending me.

I nodded once more and my smile saddened, but did not fade. Truth be told, I was too bitter and defeated about my life to be offended, at the moment.

Clark let out an almost undetectable sigh of relief, seeing that he hadn’t pissed me off. “Okay, let’s lay out how we’re going to work that into witness testimonies.”

I nodded again, feeling like a bobblehead doll. Needless to say, I wished that I could communicate more freely. After having lunch with Megan’s friends, I’d found that trying to write everything down on a whiteboard broke the flow of conversation and wasn’t an ideal method of communication. As a result, I’d tried to use the small rectangular board as little as possible, which resulted in me nodding more than I’d like.

“Maybe our key evidence could be a projection of how many people would have died due to lack of medical advancements if it weren’t for Genghis Khan. We could do compare-” Clark stopped speaking abruptly when he saw my pursed lips. “No, you don’t like that, do you? Is that too irrelevant?”

I picked up my dry-erase marker and contemplated how to write my qualms with his suggestion before Clark’s voice caused me to pause.

“You think it’s too much conjecture, don’t you? That people will just write it off as made-up statistics?”

My eyes went wide and I nodded eagerly, giving him a shocked grin. How did he know?

“Okay, so we’ll start with something less hypothetical...”

Clark and I spent the rest of the class period making a pretty decent outline of our key argument and how we were going to go about proving it. I created the outline and tried to make it look pretty by drawing along the edges while Clark talked, writing both of our insights throughout the page and listening closely to his long-winded suggestions. Clark kept surprising me over and over again. He wasn't really the dumb jock I'd assumed he was...I guess I just didn't give him a chance to prove me wrong. Instead, I was so enthralled in his baritone voice and our battle plan that I had completely forgotten that we were in a classroom, surrounded by 30 other students and a whacky teacher. We worked as a fairly effective duo, but we still had a lot of work to do by the time the final bell rang.

"Do you want to head to the library so we can work on the opening statement? I want to get it taken care of now, because I've got a really busy weekend." As he spoke, other students scrambled around us to get out of school and enjoy the brief winter sunlight...although, it was such a cloudy day that I doubt it even qualified as 'sunlight'.

I nodded and held up a single finger, indicating for him to wait. He looked confused until I pulled out my phone and texted my sister and parents that I'd be home late. This meant I was going to have to walk home in the dark with my heeled boots...crap. However, it was probably going to be worth it. For some reason, I enjoyed being around Clark...I couldn't decide why, but listening to him talk was pleasing. Maybe it was because, as he rambled, he also did his best to read my emotions. He wasn't too bad at guessing my thoughts, either. Was I that predictable, or did he just understand me on some bizarre, cosmic level?

"Okay," he said as we plopped down side-by-side on one of the library's comfy couches. "So how do you feel about starting off with something dramatic: a story that deals with a piece of technology that wouldn't have been created if it wasn't for Genghis..."

Clark continued to speak, but I didn't pay much attention to his words. Instead, I stared at his strong jawline and his light green eyes. They were very handsome...and he was sitting so close to me. The light hairs on his muscled arm barely brushed against my own arm, and I could feel my goosebumps begin to sprout. My eyes drifted to his chest. He was probably ripped...I wondered if he had a six-pack. How it would feel to run my hands over his abs, his chest? My eyes traveled further south until I was staring at his bulge. He looked decently big...definitely bigger than I'd ever been, but it was hard to tell exactly how large he was underneath his slacks...

“So, what do you think?” He interrupted my ogling, and my cheeks turned scarlet with embarrassment. I hadn’t exactly been covert, but I don’t think he noticed...I hoped he didn’t notice.

I forced a soundless cough. Good.

What on earth was wrong with me? I had to tell someone about this problem that I was having, that I’d been having for so long. I wasn’t, I couldn’t be...you know. Who would I tell, though? Mom? Would she even take me seriously? I sighed. I knew what Dad would say, if I told him. ‘Don’t be ridiculous, just power through,’ or ‘You know your mother and I love you, no matter what’ or some nonsense. But what if he didn’t? What if he and Mom surprised me and they were disappointed? What if they judged me? What if I told them, but then I later realized that I wasn’t actually...you know?

I shook off that internal debate, and met Clark’s eyes.

“Awesome. I’m so glad we’re partners.”

My cheeks grew redder, and I tried to hide that fact by pretending to scratch an itch on my face. If anything, that only drew more attention to my blushing.

“I know we’ve never really talked much before, and I regret that. You seem really cool,” he smiled at me. He had a really nice smile. The kind that you’d find if you googled the word ‘smile’.

You too I mouthed back at him awkwardly, returning a grin of my own.

He paused momentarily, as if he was considering whether or not to continue speaking. His hand was trembling slightly, although he tried his best to take deep breaths and act nonchalant. “You know, we’ve got a big game on Friday. It’s a home game, and I really want to see you there. We could hang out afterward and stuff. It’ll be loads of fun.”

I bit my lip and thought it through before nodding. Okay, I mouthed.

# CHAPTER 9

## *The Elegant Tortoise, Part 3*

**M**y head was swimming with thoughts as I walked home. It was a date, right? It certainly sounded like Clark had asked me out on a date, based on how he'd phrased the proposition. He'd told me that he thought I was 'cool', and he'd mentioned 'hanging out' after his game. What could that possibly mean, aside from a date? Why would he ask me out on a date, though? It had to be some sort of trick...

And why did I say yes? Did I really find him attractive? Was it absolutely confirmed that I was into guys? Like I'd done many times before, I wracked my brain, picturing some of the most attractive girls I could imagine. No reaction. There was never a reaction. Then I imagined Clark...in his locker room, getting undressed. Taking a shower. Okay, I felt something. It wasn't overwhelming, but it was there.

I liked...guys. I was gay. Or, straight, or...I didn't know.

I'm gay, I mouthed, testing the words on my tongue. My whole body seemed to tingle. The statement was strangely...liberating. I like guys. I have always like guys.

I released a long-held breath and I failed to hold back a smile. Tears began to well in my eyes, but nope. I'd cried too much recently. If I cried again, it'd be in the warmth of my room.

To occupy my mind with safer thoughts, I glanced around.

The sun was long gone, and everything had a dark blue hue - especially the snow coating the ground. Obviously it was cold as shit, and I thanked God for my pink woolen gloves. The beanie was a nice touch but it didn't protect my cheeks, which had started to go numb after a few minutes. After the sun dipped below the horizon, the

real cold came out to play. The kind of cold that turns your eyes red and freezes the water on your lashes.

Trampling across the tightly packed snow, I felt more vulnerable than I'd ever felt in my life. If someone wanted to attack me, it wouldn't be very hard to overwhelm my small frame. Plus, I did have some enemies. I had no chance against just about anybody physically, and I couldn't even jog in these boots. Of course, calling out for help was not an option, either.

Fortunately, I didn't run into any trouble on the icy walk, and I hurried inside my house to safety. I untensed my shoulders, and slid down to the hardwood floor, my back pressed against the front door. I basked in the indoor warmth. Although my house was only heated to room temperature, passing through the doorframe felt as if I'd stepped inside of a toasty fireplace. I shut my eyes and let out a long sigh, my mind still racing through the possible ramifications of Clark's proposal.

What if it was all just one big setup, where I'd meet up with Clark after the game, and all of his friends would be there to ambush me, and ridicule me for my foolish belief that Clark actually wanted to 'hang out' with a pathetic mute? What if they'd just laugh at me, like all of the other students in my History class had, when I'd been called upon to read?

Mom walked out and greeted me with an elated smile. "Sweetie." Her tone was loving, but also scolding. At the sound of her voice, Dad popped his curious head around the door to check what was going on, before retreating to his study. "You really should have arranged for your sister to come pick you up if you're going to stay out so late. Did you walk the whole way alone?"

I nodded, still looking toward the door to Dad's study. He didn't re-emerge. Sitting on the floor, I hugged my knees to my chest. We lived in a very safe neighborhood, so it was a bit silly to worry so much about me. She was treating me like I was some sort of fragile little princess. I guess she had a point, though. I couldn't fend for myself if the unthinkable happened.

She offered me a hand and raised me to my feet, as if I was weightless. "So why did you stay late?"

I dug around in my backpack and pulled out my whiteboard. Project for History Class, I wrote. I considered telling her about Clark, but decided better of it. I didn't want her to worry about me even more, and I wasn't ready to share my revelations about my sexual orientation with her yet. I was still confused about everything, myself. I'd always had lingering thoughts about what it'd be like to be...with a guy, but I'd never felt quite so strongly. Had my physical change heightened those feelings, or

had it just made me care less about repressing these feelings? I guess there was no way to know. And what exactly did being a 'hot chick' entail? Would that part of the wish impact my mind? No. I couldn't dwell on those implications, it would only drive me insane.

"Your handwriting is much neater than I remember." Mom remarked with raised eyebrows.

I've been practicing.

"It shows. You know, I've been thinking about it...You're acting much differently than you used to, in general."

I shrugged. Just rethinking things I wrote, before wiping it away with my sleeve.

"Care to elaborate?" She raised an eyebrow.

I hesitated, then met her intense eyes. I'd never opened up to her about anything, before...but yesterday, she had been open and honest with me. She deserved some degree of honesty in return.

I have this theory: I think I deserve this.

She squinted to read my message...I guess I'd written it in fairly small letters. With a sigh, she started herding me toward the dinner table. Megan and Dad had already eaten, and my full plate was the only thing on the table.

"That's ridiculous. You know how wishing stones work, and you know that you didn't wish for any of this. Stop blaming yourself. Stop it. It was supposed to be a compliment, by the way. You've been acting very...nicely."

Nicely?, I mouthed three times, before she realized what I was trying to say. Exacerbated by my difficulty to communicate, her mere use of that word frustrated me. Nicely. I was acting nicely? Was that because of my efforts, or was it because she couldn't hear me talk anymore? Was I finally doing what everybody wanted, and just shutting up? If anything, Mom's observation reaffirmed my belief that I deserved the brutal wishes.

"Yes, nicely. It's a good thing! You aren't...you know...you and your sister are getting along. That's all that I care about." She gave me her sweetest smile, which caused me to temporarily shelf my most sullen thoughts. Maybe she genuinely thought that I was being a better person. She shouldn't. I was the same asshole...but I was trying.

Did you want two daughters? I wrote on my board, flipping to to show her.

The question took her by surprise and she opened her mouth a little bit, as if she was contemplating her response. Perhaps she was considering whether or not to tell me the truth. "When I found out that I was pregnant with you, yes. I imagined I'd have



two girls, but that's only because I hadn't had a son before. I've always loved you just as much as your sister."

She paused and looked away from me, as if she was second-guessing if her last statement was actually the truth. I doubted her claim as well. Our family videos were almost entirely dedicated to Megan and her childhood, whereas I was more of an afterthought. In fact, Mom would always tell a long, detailed story about Megan's birth and her first few months. One time, I'd asked her about my origins, and she couldn't even supply the most basic of details. 'You know, you just came on out, and then you started to grow,' she'd told me, as if my life was a blur to her. It was a silly thing to get frustrated over, but I couldn't help feeling like a second-rate son - or daughter.

Reading my expression, she furrowed her brow and gave a second attempt at answering my question. "I wasn't really sure what I wanted, and it doesn't matter. I would never lie to you."

Is Dad ashamed of me? I wrote the words with a trembling hand, putting Mom's assertion that she'd 'never lie' to me to the ultimate test. I had a feeling that I knew the answer.

"You're our...child, and we both love you more than words. Sometimes we fail to show that, but it's the truth." Her lower jaw trembled, on the verge of tears.

I smiled weakly. Okay, I mouthed, before fighting back tears and digging into my dinner. I could sense that she was trying to be honest, and yet she'd dodged the question. In dodging it, however, she affirmed my suspicions. Could I blame Dad for being ashamed of me? Could I blame him for avoiding me at every turn, and acting so distant? Could I blame him for knowing that I wasn't even worth a second glance?

\* \* \*

After taking care of my homework, I started working on sign language again. I still wasn't sure why I was practicing. None of my family or friends actually knew sign language. Friends. I wasn't exactly sure what constituted a friendship, but I now thought of Clark and maybe Sarah as my friends. They'd had pleasant conversations with me, after all, if such a thing was even possible, given my condition.

Ever since Grandpa died, I'd had trouble connecting with people like that. At first, I'd teased other kids in Junior High, but that only lasted for a couple of years. I discovered video games, after that, and channeled my anger into pixels, rather than using it to put Jarvis Duncan in his place. Did I really have friends, now? The thought brought a faint smile to my lips. I had people who kind've cared about me, even without sharing blood

relation. Maybe I was jumping the gun, though. You have to have more than two conversations to form a friendship, right?

Shaking my head, I shelved those thoughts and watched tutorial videos with the same attractive sign man. I wasn't sure why I started calling him that. In doing so, I lost all sense of time, engrossed in learning. Working away, I'd committed dozens of new signs to memory. I even started to form some pretty complex sentences, although my hand movements were still a bit clumsy. By the time I glanced at the clock, it was already midnight. Holy shit, I couldn't remember the last time I'd spent so much dedicated time on something other than a video game.

Speaking of video games, I spent an hour or so playing some Battlefield with my West Coast friends, and had a pretty good time. We lost and whatnot, but I didn't focus on that. Instead, my main goal was just to have a good time. The entire game, Shadow and Wrapper were competing to see who could make the most convincing animal noises, so it was easy to just relax and enjoy their free comedy show.

"What animal noises can you make, Badger?" Shadow asked with a snicker.

Ha. Ha. Very funny, asshole. I typed in chat.

A sniper bullet ripped through my character's head, while I was typing, and I clenched my teeth. My instant reaction was to type an angry message blaming Shadow for my death. Instead, I shut my eyes and took two deep breaths. I wasn't going to do that anymore. I wasn't going to be like that. It was just a game...just a stupid game. Plus, everyone was having fun. I didn't want to ruin that. Not this time.

I guess I can make shark noises, I eventually typed with a thin grin.

"Sharks make sound, though, don't they?" Shadow asked skeptically.

"No way, they've got gills and shit," Vicious said with a cackling tone.

"Bullshit. How many sharks have you swam with? How do you know they don't make noise?" Shadow shot back.

"I watch Shark Week every year, don't even try me...I'll blow your mind with shark facts," Vicious proudly claimed.

"Sharks don't talk, Shadow. This ain't Finding Nemo." Wrapper quipped with a chuckle. The joke really wasn't that funny, but I laughed so hard that I cried. I did that from time to time, often embarrassingly. This time was no exception. I think the real reason I laughed so hard was because all of my buddies were laughing, too. Either way, I almost fell out of my chair from the hilarity. Right as tears streamed down my cheek, a heavy hand knocked on my bedroom door.

"You in there?" The timid words were followed by another light knock.

"I'm going to come in, okay?" Dad's voice carried through the crack beneath my door, and I scrambled to exit out of my game. Dad wasn't a big fan of me playing video games, although he permitted it, so I did my best to downplay the obscene amount of time I spent online. Luckily, I had years of practice under my belt and was able to exit out of the game, pull my headset off, and sit down on my bed by the time he opened the door. What I couldn't fix, however, were the tear trails on my cheeks and my disheveled headset hair. In his eyes, I probably looked like a complete wreck.

"Hey you," Dad said with a comforting smile, towering in the doorway. "How's it going?"

He gulped after he asked the question, clearly believing that I was riding an emotional rollercoaster. I guess he wasn't too wrong about that, though. I mean, I'd had a pretty good day, but I'd also been going through a lot recently. I didn't want to be angry at Dad...I really didn't. However, I couldn't help but feel a degree of animosity as he walked into the room with his calculating pale blue eyes. He hadn't even talked to me since my transformation...not even a 'hello' or a 'how are you doing? How was your day?' Nothing. I was left to assume that he viewed me as a disappointment. I suspected that he'd always viewed me that way, though. Now, I was both a disappointment and an embarrassment. How could I blame him for not wanting to associate with me?

Fine, I mouthed, looking up at him as he took a seat beside me on my unmade bed. I hadn't chatted with Dad in the past few days, which wasn't uncharacteristic. Before the wishing stone incident, he generally never talked to me individually unless I was in some sort of trouble. He was a busy man, and he never considered me to be a priority. Even so, we usually exchanged pleasantries every day. He'd become a ghost, ever since my change.

"I know that I haven't always gone out of my way to check up on you..." He began, and I fought back the urge to roll my eyes. 'Check up on me'...that was certainly one way to phrase it. In my eyes, he all but ignored my existence if he wasn't going to scold me for something, ground me, or make a terrible Dad joke. "I just want you to know that you can come to me any time. If you ever have trouble with anything."

Bullshit. He'd never reached out to me once and all of the sudden I could come to him with my problems? That struck me as highly unlikely, just a piece of empty rhetoric.

He watched me carefully, upon finishing his little speech. While he stared, I hopped off my bed and foraged in my book bag until I found my whiteboard. Mom put you up to this, didn't she? I wrote, automatically resting my cheek on the back side of my

hand, one of Mom's common mannerisms. Upon realizing this, I retreated my hand, then shot Dad an annoyed glare.

"It's that obvious, huh?" He winced as he read the whiteboard, an expression which gradually turned into a smile. It was as if he expected me to reciprocate his smile, but I had no intention of doing so. "You know how she is about things. She doesn't think we spend enough time together."

No shit. His words, combined with his smile, caused new tears to well in my eyes. Not tears of laughter, this time.

I wished that I could have told him exactly what was wrong with everything he'd just said, but I couldn't. Instead, with a shaky hand, I started to write a new message to him. I felt a flurry of emotions. Above all else, however, I felt betrayed. Tears started to blot on the whiteboard, but I persisted regardless. Don't worry. Your guest appearance is going to fix fifteen years of treating me like a second class, unwanted - I hadn't managed the letter spacing very well and ran out of room. In the end, it didn't even matter, as I dropped the whiteboard to the carpeted floor amid a torrent of tears after Dad had a chance to read the message. I knew that he'd read it from the sharp breath he took and the curse word that he muttered under his breath.

"Hey there..." Dad wrapped an arm around my shoulder and looked at me with a pained expression. He took a breath, as if he was about to say something important, before he realized that my crying wasn't going to stop any time soon. Instead, he chose to draw me closer in his one-armed hug. "It's okay. Let it all out."

And I did. I let it all out. The pain of loss, the sadness over Dad's treatment of me, the anger at Jarvis. It all came pouring from my eyes. All the while, Dad held me in his lap, securing me in a hug, seemingly unperturbed by the fact that I was a freak.

Eventually, I began to calm myself to the point that tears stopped streaming down my cheeks. I was still breathing heavily, on the verge of hyperventilating, but Dad's warm hug helped to soothe me. My cheeks still buzzed with that unique after-crying sensation. I was angry with him, but I also felt like I needed him. He was my Dad, after all. I couldn't stay angry with him, could I? I was tempted to tell him to get out of my room, but I knew nothing good would come of that.

Seeing that I'd regained composure, he continued. "You're right. You're one hundred percent right. I'm sorry. I've just..." He closed his eyes and rubbed my shoulder, the lines of concern on his face creasing deeply. "I could sit here and make all sorts of excuses about work, but the truth is that I haven't been the best dad I could be. I'm sorry." The words barely made their way out of his mouth, as tears of his own began to swim. "I know you were close with my dad. I know you loved him, and you spent a lot

of time with him. I never thought about what would happen after he passed. We never talked about it...I didn't pick up his slack. It never...it never occurred to me. You and me never really sat down and had a conversation like this. I didn't know...I didn't know what to do."

His voice shook while he spoke, barely escaping above a whisper. "And your change...it was just so out of the blue. I had no idea what to do, so I've been focusing on anything else. I filled out your paperwork, and then I tried to forget about...everything." The tears manifested themselves and slowly worked their way down his cheeks, marking the first time I'd actually seen a grown man cry.

"I wasn't there for you. I haven't been there for you. I'm so sorry."

This time, it was my turn to wrap him in a hug, rubbing a hand against his back and letting his tears trickle down into my hair.

"Oh, Christ," Dad took a deep breath as his tears began to dry up. "I haven't done that in...I can't even remember how long." He looked down at me and smiled melancholically. Leaning down, he gave me a kiss on the forehead, his graying brown bristle of facial hair grazing like comforting, coarse sandpaper against my skin.

For the next hour, we sat on my bed talking. Well, Dad talked and I mostly listened. From time to time, I'd add something by mouthing or writing it out on my whiteboard, but those moments were few and far between. For the most part, I just opened my ears. Dad seemed to enjoy talking to me, and it wasn't long before we were both laughing. I guess that there was a demand for people who just sat and listened. As he talked and opened up to me, I felt valuable for the first time in a long time.

"You know, when your mother was your age she looked just like you. It's funny..." his voice trailed off and I looked up at him curiously. Glancing down, he noticed my expression and felt obligated to explain. "Sorry, you just reminded me of something that happened a long time ago."

I lifted an eyebrow and continued to stare up at him.

"Alright, alright. I'll tell you. When your Mom and I met, she was the quietest person I'd ever met. She was so nervous all the time, she just didn't trust herself to talk. For our first date..." Dad began, before taking note of my doubtful expression. "Seriously! I'm not kidding!"

Mom? I mouthed, at which Dad nodded fervently. Wow. Mom was the most confident woman I'd ever known. She was bold and talkative, the life of every party. If someone pissed her off, she'd let them know all about it. I'd heard her badger countless vendors over the phone about unfulfilled orders for her small ecommerce business. Plus, she sure never had any reservations about yelling at me...

“Seriously,” he repeated, before continuing his story. “For our first date, she was too nervous to tell her parents about it beforehand. When I came to the front door, her dad was standing there with a shotgun aimed at my head. Told me I had ten seconds to tell him why I was there or he’d shoot.” I’d never had a chance to meet Mom’s dad, and this was the first story I’d ever heard about him. Unlike Dad’s father, my maternal grandfather had died relatively young in some sort of skiing accident. I never learned the full details, though.

“I put my hands up and said ‘Mr. Thornson, I’m here to take your daughter on a date.’ Of course, I was nowhere near that eloquent. I was babbling and stuttering, but I got the point across anyway. And...well...the rest was history.”

I looked up at him with confusion, and scrawled some words down onto my whiteboard. How did Mom get over her nervousness?

“Well,” he said, giving me a comforting grin. “People change over time. She wanted to conquer her fears and become a stronger person, so she did. It didn’t happen overnight, but she made it work. I think one of the things that helped her was keeping a journal. Not a normal journal, though...she’d just write down one thing that she could have done better that day. Usually, it was only a few words. Stuff like: “Ask the cashier how his day was,” and that sort of thing. She kept it to herself at first, and I think that she was embarrassed about it. One day, I caught her writing and she showed me what she was doing.” His face lit up with a bright smile, his mind recalling the overwhelming love he felt for Mom. “I think she still keeps the journal, too. I found it by the bedstand the other night.” He gave me a reassuring pat on the head. “I bet half the entries in there are about you, to be honest.”

Really? I asked, my eyes wide with wonder. I knew that Mom tried to be a good mother to me, but did she really care that much? It definitely hadn’t seemed that way in the past...but then again, I hadn’t always given her much to work with.

“Really. I know I could do a better job at...at being your Dad. I’m going to make it up to you, though, Johanna.” He gave me another pat on the head and smiled down at me. “Why don’t we do something together this weekend? We can get some ice cream before I bring you to the doctor on Sunday, just like you always did with your grandfather...”

Ice cream? I mouthed, grabbing my arms to make a shivering gesture. Whenever grandpa had taken me for ice cream, he’d done it in the height of summer, not winter.

Dad seemed to get the point, and laughed. “Hot chocolate, then?”

I nodded, with a silent laugh of my own, giving Dad a hug before he wished me a good night and walked out the door.

My heart throbbing with emotions from such a wild day, I plopped down on my bed. After a few minutes of staring at the ceiling and waiting for morning to arrive, I decided to take a new approach. With a determined grin, I rolled myself into a snug cocoon inside my blanket, as tightly as possible. I hadn't wrapped myself up like that since I was a kid, but it made me feel much safer and more peaceful. After only a couple of minutes, I drifted into a peaceful sleep.

# CHAPTER 10

## *A Touch of Vengeance*

“**W**ake up, Jo Jo,” Mom’s cheery voice startled me and I quietly groaned. I never agreed to that nickname, and I didn’t particularly enjoy it. I hadn’t gone by Joe as a guy and there was no way I was going to let people call me ‘Jo Jo’. To get my point across, I sent Mom the harshest glare I could muster as I rolled out of my cocoon.

“You said you’d help with breakfast. Get your butt in gear.” She grinned and peeled off my blanket, tossing it aside onto my bed. How did she have so much energy? The sun wasn’t even up yet. I let loose a long yawn and gathered myself before plodding down the stairs behind her.

When we got to the kitchen, I was bitterly amused to see that Mom had gotten me an apron of my own. The apron was same icy blue as my eyes and fairly plain, aside from frills along its bottom edge. She’d even sewn my name into it, in fancy lettering. Geez, she was really going all-out on this whole ‘new daughter’ thing, wasn’t she? Maybe the gift was her way of apologizing after our tense talk yesterday.

“Okay, we’re going to be cooking breakfast crepes. Have you ever made anything similar before?”

I shook my head and attempted to scoff. Of course I’d never cooked anything like that. I’d never really cooked at all before, unless spreading peanut butter and jelly on wonder-bread counted as cooking.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be a pro soon enough,” She winked at me, and I wrinkled my nose. Exactly how often did she expect me to help her in the kitchen? Why did I have to start learning how to cook, just because I became a girl? Great job combating traditional gender roles, Mom...



Disregarding my hesitation, we started cooking. Maybe 'cooking' wasn't the right word, though. Instead, much of the process involved Mom ordering me around and peering over my shoulder, inspecting my work. First, she told me to butter the pan. Apparently, I did a horrific job and used way too much butter, because she spent the next minute scraping off most of my work while I prepared the batter. She helped me balance all of the proportions, but the mixing was all me. It was physically taxing to stir everything together and I couldn't help but feel like a weakling. Before long my arm felt like it was made of jelly, and mental fortitude was the sole reason my arm continued stirring.

"This is the most important part. If the batter is too thick, the whole thing will come out lumpy and yucky." I knew she was trying to be helpful, but the added pressure definitely didn't aid me. My batter seemed to be decent enough once I'd finished, however, because Mom didn't criticize it at all. I hid my proud smile as we chopped the veggies. I enjoyed the smell of the sizzling batter, the satisfying thunk each time I sliced a vegetable, and the approving nods that Mom was giving me. I couldn't let her know that I was having fun, though. If she knew, she'd force me to do this way more often...although I guess that wouldn't be too horrible.

"You know, I used to help your grandmother with dinner every night." Mom leaned up against the kitchen's solitary granite-topped island as she spoke, her eyes glazed as she delved into her memories.

I raised an eyebrow. She didn't seriously think I was going to be helping cook every day, did she?

"She always cooked with her special spoon. It was a raggedy old wooden thing that she could never let go. She loved that thing to death, and I think she still does. It got so beaten up that she stopped cooking with it, and she hadn't cooked with it for years. Just this last weekend, though, I opened one of her drawers and guess what I found?" Mom shot me a loving smile. "Same old damned spoon. That woman would rather die than throw anything away."

As we continued to cook, Mom filled the silence with surprisingly delightful stories about her life and our family history. I didn't mind, listening intently as I laid cheese inside of the crepes. She had a nice voice...mine probably would have sounded something like hers if I'd been capable of speech. I let out a wistful sigh, and closed my eyes. Mom was acting as if I had always been her quiet daughter, and I didn't know exactly how to feel about that. At least she treated me like a person, unlike some people...

I quietly gasped and my eyes shot wide open when a pair of powerful arms wrapped themselves around my stomach in a tight embrace.

"I caught one!" Dad called out with a laugh, lifting my feet off of the ground and spinning me around. Apparently, he'd managed to sneak up behind me while I wasn't paying attention. As soon as I realized it was him, all fear subsided.

I fought off the urge to squeal from excitement and ultimately failed. Thankfully, no sound came out, so nobody heard my girlish exclamation. Regardless, my face was beat red when Dad put me back onto the ground and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"Morning, sweetie." Usually, Dad left for work either before or after I awoke, so I didn't see much of him in the morning. Did he break his usual routine for me? My heart leapt at the thought...he really cared about me, didn't he? Maybe all of the pleasing things he'd told me the previous night hadn't been complete lies...

Morning, I mouthed back at him with a stupid grin.

"What's for breakfast?" he asked, striding over to the oven and checking in on our crepes with a quick sniff. He waited for Mom to join him beside the oven before ambushing her with a hug as well. Unlike mine, her squeals were fully audible and I couldn't help but giggle at the sight. She was kind-hearted, but she was usually a fairly serious woman. I definitely didn't expect Dad to swoop down and steal a kiss on her lips before they ended their hug. I wasn't quite sure how to feel about that, so I just looked away and tried not to get grossed out. I mean, it was weird seeing my parents kiss...I couldn't even remember the last time I'd seen them show any sort of affection toward each other like that. What had caused it? Why was Dad in such a good mood? Was it because of the chat he had with me? My heart fluttered at the mere prospect. Had I done something right for once?

After fifteen minutes of chatting and waiting, we saw the fruits of our labor: four delicious crepes. To my surprise, I'd actually had fun while cooking with Mom. She was good company, and I always enjoyed learning new things, especially things that would help prepare me for the future. My family was pretty old school, and I had a feeling that I'd be expected to help cook for family dinner now that I was a girl. It was stupid and infuriating, but I'd found that sometimes it's better to just go with the flow. If I knew more about cooking, it would definitely make things easier on Sunday nights.

\* \* \*

"Hey," Caroline(?) greeted me as I sat down next to her before Geology class began. At this point, it was too late to ask for her name without suffering embarrassment.

I flashed a brief smile and readjusted my scarf. Scarves were my new favorite clothing item, and I have no idea how I lived without them. In the bitter cold, they were a godsend...plus this one looked nice on me. It was patterned blue and grey, and made of something soft.

“How are you doing?” She sounded nervous as she spoke to me. I wondered if she thought I was dangerous or something. I silently giggled at the thought. It was nigh impossible to be afraid of me...I couldn't weigh much more than 110 pounds, soaking wet. I didn't know my weight for sure, though...we didn't have any scales in the house and I hadn't visited the doctor yet. Apparently, that was going to be a weekend adventure, and I wasn't looking forward to it.

No P.E. today, so I'm good. I wrote to her on my whiteboard.

“I don't really like P.E. either,” she said with a small smile. “I don't think Coach Tiller likes me.”

That sucks. I'm just not very good at sports. As I wrote, she peered over my shoulder impatiently and I felt a pang of guilt. She had to go so far out of her way to hold a conversation with me...it must have felt like a chore to her.

“Oh,” she giggled anxiously and grinned. “I'm not that good either. My brother got all of the athletic genes, I think. Nothing left over for me.”

I returned her smile. Such is life, I wrote, then I added a small note as the bell rang. Thanks for talking to me.

As she read my note, her face showed a glimpse of condolence as her eyebrows furrowed. I didn't want to throw a pity party and make her uncomfortable, but I suppose I'd already done that. Crap. Why did I always do shit like that? Rubbing my temple with one hand, I wrapped the other around my eraser and began lazily dragging it across my desk.

Mr. Bradley's voice followed the bell with fervor, capturing everyone's attention and momentarily pausing my eraser's journey: “Okay, class! Today we're going to be discussing the Moon and - principally - its rocks and geological formations. As you all know, the first person to set foot on the Moon was Britain's Benjamin Aster in 1966...”

Class went on lackadaisically until we were freed for lunch. Infuriatingly, Bradley had kept us a few minutes after the bell, ‘all in the name of learning’. Typical Bradley.

As we headed out the door, Caroline had told me that she always ate lunch with her brother and offered me a spot at their table, which I accepted with a wary nod. Truthfully, I was surprised that she still wanted to hang out with me. Before we went to the cafeteria, though, I had to stop off in the bathroom. I did my best to mime my intentions to Caroline, and I think she understood. We split off in different directions,

and she looked to have a bounce to her step. It brought a faint smile to my lips. I'd give anything to be as happy as her. How could people be so happy all of the time? It was a complete mystery to me.

Trodding down the mostly empty hallway toward the bathroom, a hand grabbed my shoulder with tight malice. I spun around and found myself face-to-face with Tina and her two goons. A quick glance around confirmed that we were effectively isolated in this wing of the hall, with no other students in sight. Everyone was busy making a dash for the lunch tables.

"Look girls, we've found a whiny little bitch. Does those words sound familiar? Whiny. Little. Bitch?" They did sound familiar. That was my nickname for Tina, after she ratted on me back in Junior High for making fun of her headgear. "Sorry...a whiny little thing, crying to Coach because I hurt your precious feelings."

Tina's lips curled into a smile. She gave me a shove, which - combined with the awkward weight of my backpack - almost sent me toppling over. Luckily, I was able to keep my balance. I didn't know what I did to her to warrant this kind of treatment, but I was tired of it.

"Are you gonna cry, now?" She asked, as my jaw startled to tremble. "What's wrong? Are you wishing that you weren't a freak? How's it feel?" Her voice wavered. "How's it fucking feel? Not good, huh?"

No, I wasn't going to cry. Not today. I knew how bullying worked, better than most. If I didn't stand up to her, she'd never stop. With a deep breath, I summoned all of my courage and let my backpack straps slide off my shoulders, dropping my backpack to the ground. Tina had 2 or 3 inches on me and probably outweighed me by over 40 pounds, but I'd have to take my chances. I wasn't going to be someone's punching bag.

Without giving her a chance to prepare, I charged at her, swinging my fist into her stomach with as much strength as I could muster. It didn't think I hit her that hard, but I felt her soft stomach squish inward a bit as I thrust my fist forward. It was an intoxicatingly good feeling, as if my fist was a hammer slamming into a sponge. The sharp grunt of pain that came out of her mouth was even more gratifying. That sound took me back to the past.

She immediately keeled over, falling to the cold floor and gasping for breath. It was a quick, decisive fight. As she rolled on the white floor whimpering, I knew that she'd learnt her lesson. She'd learned to only understand strength, and I just showed her that I was still a force to be reckoned with.

My heart swelling with pride and confidence, I turned my attention to her two friends. Were they going to fight me, too? Were they going to stick up for their friend,

or were they just around for show? One of them had knelt down to help Tina, but the other stood with a look of shock on her face, staring at me. No, she wasn't staring at me...her fearful eyes were trained behind me, as if something had captured her attention.

"Ms. Larsen!" A voice of authority boomed from behind me. I froze as I heard the unmistakable clomp of approaching derby shoes. It had to be Principal Morris. The miniscule hairs on the back of my neck stood tall, and goosebumps crawled up my arms.

"You've earned yourself a spot in the prestigious After School Scholar program," Morris said in his southern drawl. He was a colorful man, and a notorious hard-ass. He didn't have much sympathy for his students, and seemed to value us far less than the University of Auburn's football program. He wore Auburn attire almost every day, and rumor stated that he hadn't missed one of their games in three decades. While he spoke, Tina was still on the floor, rolling around and writhing in pain. I almost rolled my eyes at her melodramatic performance. Any passerby would have probably thought that she'd been stabbed.

"Do you know what that means?" Morris continued, his voice ringing throughout the corridor as if it were an acoustics hall.

I slowly turned around to face him. He had always been on the tall side, but now he seemed like some sort of giant. Looking up, I made brief contact with his disappointed chestnut eyes, my heart still pounding my adrenaline. I clenched my jaw and gave a slight nod.

Everyone at this school knew what being an 'After School Scholar' meant: detention. Two hours of utter boredom. 'After School Scholar' was just his clever way of phrasing it, and doubled as a snarky abbreviation. I'd never actually gotten detention since Junior High, and this was only the second or third time I'd spoken to the fierce bald man...although perhaps 'spoken' was not the correct word, given my condition. Needless to say, this conversation was extremely one-sided, and I had no chance of arguing my case.

"Good. You'd better be there on time, not a second late. If you're late, you'll be on top of Mount Rewed with a pair of skis. Ski-rewed. Got that?"

He pulled out an unmistakable gray slip with his right hand, which was enclosed in a thin white latex glove. He jotted a few words down onto it, his glove squeaking as he wrote, before handing the slip to me. Detention Form, Name: Joanna Larsen was scrolled across the top. He couldn't even manage to spell my name properly, I noted with a bitter flare of my nostrils.

I suppressed a groan and nodded once more. Great. Just great. Detention with this weirdo. I felt like curling up into a ball and crying, but decided against it. It was all so unfair, too. If only he'd seen our entire interaction. Why was the world so unfair all the time? Tina was allowed to run around making my life a living hell, but the second I did something in response, I was some sort of villain? What the hell?

"You," he pointed to Tina, who still laid in agony on the floor. "Get up, you weren't even nominated."

"What does that mean?" She asked, as she suddenly found herself cured of her mortal wounds and began to crawl to her feet.

"It means your Oscar chances are slim! Now, all of you, scatter to the wind." He clicked his tongue at Tina as he spoke, shaking his head with disdain. Still glaring with disappointment and fury, he focused his attention on me. "I don't want to see you near any of these three, Larsen. Understood?"

I nodded once more. That was an agreement I was eager to keep, although I doubted they would make it easy. By the vindictive look on Tina's face, I had a feeling that she wouldn't quickly forget about this scuffle.

After he let me go, I continued along toward the bathroom, carefully checking behind me to see if Tina was following for quick vengeance. Thankfully, the coast was clear. I scampered into the bathroom and plopped down on a toilet. I let out a deep sigh of relief as I peed. I'd held it in for so long...

I didn't find it too weird to pee sitting down. To be honest, I peed sitting down most of the time when I was a guy. I'd always sat down to poop, then peed at the same time, out of convenience.

Finishing up, I took a look at myself in the mirror. Same as I looked earlier. No makeup, no frills, just a small girl with raven hair and light blue eyes, wearing hand-me-down clothing and a comfy scarf. My eyes settled on my tiny fist. That same fist had laid Tina out on the ground. I swelled with pride, and a smile crept across my lips.

I practiced throwing a few punches toward the mirror, but they all looked silly, harmless, and uncoordinated. I doubted I'd ever be able to replicate the same punch I'd hit her with...but I'd kicked her ass! And the look on her face...she was so surprised, so crestfallen. She thought that she was free to torment me, just because she'd become bigger and stronger, yet I'd taught her a lesson, and reminded her why she shouldn't mess with me.

My smile wavered momentarily. She'd looked so hopeful, when she first saw me. So vengeful. Could I blame her for wanting to beat me up? If I was in her shoes, I would have wanted to beat myself up.

\* \* \*

By the time I got to the cafeteria, it was unsurprisingly packed. I grabbed my gross, mushy food and scanned around for Caroline's bright blonde hair. I spotted her after a few seconds, as she was waving at me. I scampered over to her, the remnants of a smile still on my face. I almost tripped on a wet stretch of the floor, but managed to keep my balance and avoid embarrassing myself. Wet floors went with winter like peanut-butter and jelly. Regardless, the near-fall didn't even phase me. I was still replaying the fight in my mind, my heart pounding with leftover adrenaline.

"What's got you in such a good mood?" Caroline grinned a particular kind of grin. The kind you wear when you watch bunny rabbits playing with each other.

I shrugged. Although I wasn't laughing or giggling or anything, my smiles were probably infrequent enough to demand questioning. Pulled out my detention slip, I showed it to her.

"For punching another student?" Caroline eyed me up and down before letting out a snort. "Who did you punch?"

I glanced around the room and pointed toward Tina, who was sitting a few tables over, holding a pack of ice against her stomach and fixing me with a death glare. Despite my lingering guilt, that image made me giggle, as I placed my tray on the table and sat down. Tina, ever the drama queen.

"Oh my God," Caroline joined me in laughing. "That's savage. She probably deserved it, though. She thinks she's so cool and powerful, like she's Norwegian or something."

Norway was, of course, the strongest country on Earth. Every big technology company seemed to come from the Scandinavian country, and their GDP dwarfed that of every other country. Norwegian pop stars seemed to headline almost every major global event, and losers like Tina wore t-shirts that sported Norway's flag.

Dad was a bit of a Norwegian wanna-be, too. He had made sure that I was enrolled in Norwegian language classes every year. It was the world's lingua franca, he argued, and I'd need to learn it if I wanted to do any sort of international travel. I suppose that was all pointless, though...I mean, how could I possibly travel if I couldn't speak? It would be so much more difficult.

"By the way, have you met my brother yet?" Caroline gestured toward the boy sitting next to me, who had been engrossed in conversation with a pretty brunette up until that point.

“Clark,” she reached around my back to tap him on the shoulder. My heart leapt. Clark was her brother?

Sure enough, Clark turned away from his conversation and his eyebrows rose with surprise when he found himself face-to-face with me. It was undoubtedly him, with his handsome face and beautiful eyes. His wonderful physique...my eyes began to wander.

“Hey Johanna,” he laughed. “I guess you’re my sister’s new mystery friend.”

I smiled and shrugged, giving him a small wave as my heart fluttered. Damn, he was attractive.

I pulled out my whiteboard. Are you twins? I was ashamed that I hadn’t thought of that earlier, considering how similar their features were. They had the same golden hair, matching eyes, and similar facial structure. However, Cheran was a large school and it could have been a complete coincidence.

“Oh, yeah. Caroline is a few minutes older. According to her, she’s my big sister.” Clark replied, giving Caroline a snarky side-glance.

I nodded and mouthed Cool. So, I was right about her name...it was Caroline! I didn’t even have to embarrass myself finding out, either.

“How do you know each other?” she asked both of us, evidently surprised to find that we’d met before.

“We’re working on that History project together. We’re both lawyers for the mock trial,” Clark explained for me.

“Oh, so she’s the girl you told me about. The one you’ve got a crush on.” Judging by the devious smile spreading across Caroline’s face, she knew exactly what she’d just done.

Both Clark and I went bright red, and looked away from each other. I started to eat some of my prison food, and my cheeks burned. He had a crush on me? So I was right to think that Friday’s ‘hangout’ proposition was actually a date...Oh my God, I was going on a date. With a guy. With a physically attractive guy. My whole body tingled and I licked my lips instinctively. This was actually happening, and I...I liked it.

I pulled a page out of my notebook and eloquently scribbled in it. After taking a moment to ensure that Caroline was otherwise occupied, I folded the paper into a neat square and discretely handed it to Clark. He opened it, careful not to ruin my folding, and read my message: I like you, too.

His face lit up as soon as he saw it, and we shared a silent smile. We sat quietly by each other’s side as all of the other students chattered around us. I had a million emotions swirling in my heart and mind, but couldn’t manage to put them into words.



I imagine he felt the same, as his green eyes locked onto mine. At some point, the bell rang and other students scrambled out of their seats and headed toward their next classes. They passed by us as if they were traveling at lightning speed, but I paid them no mind. I was in a whole different world, occupied only by myself and Clark...and I was okay with that. He liked me...he actually liked me.

# CHAPTER 11

## *Thin Ice*

“**T**here will be no use of E-letronics.” Principal Morris continued, adding unnecessary stress on the letter ‘E’. He paced up and down the aisles like a motivational speaker as he recited the rules of detention, even though there were only four other students present.

On his hands, Morris wore tight white gloves, as he often did. They were the kind you’d find nurses wearing in a hospital, stretchy and elastic. I had heard rumors that he was a germaphobe, or had some sort of severe phobia about contracting illness. Some students would laugh about it behind his back, and crack jokes about how he wore the gloves to avoid leaving evidence after he committed heinous crimes. He was an inscrutable person, though, and I suspected that none of the other students truly knew what his deal was.

“If you need to use the restroom, you must ask first. If you are gone for longer than 10 minutes, you will officially become a missing person and we will launch a search and rescue operation. Is that understood?”

I couldn’t tell if he was being serious or facetious. Sometimes, it was hard to tell. However, the point was clear: he didn’t want us spending excess time on bathroom breaks.

“Get working,” he concluded his practiced speech, and clicked his stopwatch on. Two hours. Unfortunately, my Mom and Dad were going to some fancy dinner for his work and my sister was using the opportunity to spend some quality time at her boyfriend’s house in Minneapolis. As a result, I was stuck without any means of transportation...and the temperature was supposed to dip below 0 Fahrenheit. Any way you sliced it, this was going to be a shitty evening.

Taking a quiet sigh, I pulled out my homework and 'got working'. Math, English, Geology, and a worksheet for Norwegian. The latter was almost pointless, as there was a precisely 0% chance that I was going to learn how to speak Norwegian in the classroom. Filling out worksheets and memorizing vocabulary was useful in theory, but I still struggled to hold a Norwegian conversation. I grimaced at the thought. Of course, I'd never actually be able to hold a conversation in any language anymore. Poor little me. Wrinkling my nose, I put those thoughts to the side and concentrated on completing my homework.

Time flew by and when I looked out the window, the sun had long since disappeared from the sky. Bored and finished with my homework, I glanced around at the other unlucky students. A sulking redheaded girl with tattoos up and down her arms, and three scrappy-looking guys. Together, we probably looked like low-budget Breakfast Club cosplayers who hadn't actually seen the movie. One of the guys made awkward eye contact with me and we shared an exhausted, empty stare. Undoubtedly, nobody in the room was enjoying detention. I suppose that was the idea, though.

Beyond bored, I began to study Principal Morris as he scribbled away on some document with admirably precise pen-strokes. I'd practiced writing so much recently that I could close my eyes and accurately imagine the curve of each one of his letters, just based on his grip and movement. On his hands, he still wore those tight gloves. Was it difficult for him to grip a pen while wearing those? I'd never given his gloves much thought in the past. I'd always been wrapped up in my own nonsense, and had barely even noticed. One of the benefits of losing my voice was my newfound ability to listen and observe, and I found myself studying his mannerisms and questioning the rumors.

During detention, Principal Morris coughed precisely two times, and each time he took great care to anticipate the coughs and bury his face snugly in the nook of his elbow. Each time a student coughed, Morris visibly winced, breaking his pen-stroke while he was writing. As he did, his eyes were filled with a particular kind of sadness that ran deep to his core. Studying him, a realization dawned upon me: his obsession with gloves might not be a neurosis or idiosyncrasy.

He could have some sort of immune deficiency issue, and the gloves were his attempt to stave off illness. He constantly wiped down his desk with disinfectant not because he enjoyed it, or because of irrational fear. He was only a sneeze away from death. I saw it in his eyes, and a wave of sympathy and guilt rushed through me. I hadn't made fun of him too often, but I distinctly recall saying some nasty things about him a year ago. I'd been trying to fit in with some upper-classmen and figured

that they would be impressed if I insulted the Principal behind his back. At the time, my efforts were successful and I almost made a few new friends, but now I was overwhelmed with regret. What the fuck was wrong with me?

Beeeeep. Principal Morris' stopwatch alarm finally went off. "You know what that means. You're all free to go. I never want to see any of you in here again. You understand me?"

Morris' rhetorical question was met by silence. "I asked you a question: 'Do you understand me?'" He repeated, his voice pounding on each word like an anvil.

This time, we muttered a chorus of "Yeah"s. Of course, I simply mouthed the word, before grabbing my bag and darting for the door.

\* \* \*

Once I was outside, I pulled my furry parka around me as tightly as possible. I had four layers on, but it was still beyond chilly. The sun had fallen some time ago, and the darkness brought with it a uniquely bone-chilling cold. The kind that made you completely forget the sensation of warmth. Around me, snow lightly tumbled to the ground, illuminated by streetlights as I walked down the empty sidewalk. It brought a smile to my lips. I'd always liked the snow.

Thankfully, I hadn't worn my heeled boots, so walking on the icy, snowy concrete wasn't too difficult. I filled my lungs with as much air as I could muster and watched it shoot out in front of me, forming a brilliant cloud. I huffed when I saw a giant sign above the distant hockey rink reading 'Duncan Arena'. Jarvis certainly did get all three of his stupid wishes. Whatever.

Today was possibly the best day of my life. I couldn't think of a single day that could compare to it. I got to punch Tina in the stomach, and found out that my two friends were actually related...and - of course - that Clark had a crush on me! Sure, I had been sentenced to detention, but that was quite minor in the grand scheme of life.

I did a full twirl as I walked, giddy with excitement. As I turned around, I spotted the outline of a person wearing dark clothing. They were about 20 feet from me, and I figured they'd been following me for quite some time. Like an elk in the center of the highway, I froze. My stomach churned, and I opened my mouth, hyperventilating. Even if I could scream, I wouldn't have been able to produce any sound. I was in survival mode: fight or flight. Looking to my left and right for potential assistance, my heart started to pound in my ears. As the figure walked closer, I finally screamed out for help, although I knew it would be futile.

Out of options, I turned and ran. My boots pounded on the icy sidewalk and I sprinted as fast as I could. Although I was fueled by desperation and survival instincts, I was neither as coordinated nor as athletic as the hooded assailant. It took only a couple seconds for the anonymous stalker to tackle me to the ground. I slammed into the sidewalk face-up with a thud, the back of my head bouncing off the icy ground. It hadn't been a good landing, as I had been tackled to the ground like a ragdoll. I laid sprawled out, the back of my parka resting against the icy sidewalk, as the attacker stood over me.

Please, I mouthed out. Please. I'd never felt so vulnerable before in my life. It was terrifying. Slowly, my eyes started to focus and I made out the face of my assailant: Jarvis Duncan.

"They say justice smells pretty sweet," Jarvis grunted. "And you smell pretty good, so..." his nonsensical statement trailed into silence. Then gave a pompous, superior laugh, as if he was some sort of genius for devising a plan like this.

No no no I tried to say, but obviously he couldn't hear me. He probably wouldn't have cared, anyway. That was my moment I lost control. My mind raced with all of possible things that he could do to me, and tears raced down my cheek.

"You crying, little bitch?" he asked in a mocking voice, harking back to Junior High. "I'm so glad you can't talk anymore. At least you're hot, I guess." He put his boot up to my neck, pressing in until the pain became unbearable. "Show me. Take off your coat," he ordered.

My coat? The air was frigid, and all I was wearing beneath my parka was a blouse.

"Remember when you told me that I'd lost my lunch money privileges?" he snarled. "Well, you just lost your coat privileges. Who's the retard now?"

I parted my lips, and only small clouds of breath escaped. The incident, though it had occurred over three years prior, flashed before my eyes. Pre-pubescent Jarvis had been backed into the corner of the bathroom, his back against the tiles. He cowered in fear as I stood over him. He was too dim to outsmart me, and too small to fight back, but that hadn't stopped me. I'd been too bitter to consider the mark that my intimidation would have on his life, too foolish to see the mark that a profoundly unclever insult would have on him, and too self-absorbed to understand the pain I caused, the fear I wrought.

I understood it, now, though. I knew that fear all too well, as the mammoth boy towered above me, his lips curled into a vengeful grin. This was true powerlessness.

I'm sorry, I mouthed, but Jarvis didn't even seem to notice that I'd been forming words. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I'm sorry!

Though my words were desperate, they weren't false. I wasn't sure how I'd missed it beforehand, but this apology was long overdue. The apology should have come days ago, when Jarvis confronted me in the locker room. Years ago, even. I had bullied him. I'd never admitted it to myself in such plain words, before. I'd bullied him. I was a shitty, selfish brat, and I'd siphoned pleasure from his pain.

I'm sorry I repeated, still hyperventilating.

It was all futile. Jarvis reached down and tore off my parka. As soon as it fell from my shoulders, I shuddered - out of both fear and chill.

"This is mine now," he smirked. "You look hotter without it, little bitch." The bare skin of my arms rested on the snowy ground, causing my whole body to shiver. Normally, my breaths were too quiet to be heard by the human ear - a side effect of Jarvis' wish. Now, though, I could hear them ever so faintly.

"Are you cold?"

Yes, I wanted to say, but didn't. He'd proven his point. He was stronger than me, in every way, and he was giving me what I deserved. I used to think Jarvis was just an idiot or a dumb bully, but now...now, I realized how wrong I was. Jarvis wasn't the bully. Jarvis wasn't the tormentor. I was. My stomach began to twist, as I rewinded through my past. Back in Junior High, I'd made his life a living hell. Then, I'd transferred that same malice to my own family, and darkened all of their lives, acting as my own curse.

My teeth were already starting to chatter and goosebumps dotted my arms.

"Now..." he began, as if searching through his mind for another way to humiliate me. "...you have to walk all the way home," he said with a manic grin, and I let out a small sigh of relief. Unless he planned on tackling me to the ground again, I'd managed to survive the encounter. Did I even deserve to survive, though? Did I deserve to live on, after all of the pain I'd brought to the world?

Hesitantly, I struggled to my feet. Something deep within me insisted that I continue onward. A survival instinct, perhaps, that had yelled at me for not rising from the icy ground. I collected my backpack and began the march toward my house.

I imagine that Jarvis watched me as I left, holding my parka and staring at me with those beady, triumphant eyes of his. He had every right to gloat over my defeat. I didn't look back, though. I tried to travel as quickly as possible to avoid getting too cold, but found that my boots were slipping on the icy sidewalk and I'd have to be careful about my pace. I was only a few blocks from home, although my attempted escape run had put me slightly off of my usual path. I walked faster, biting my cold lip and willing my teeth to cease their chattering.

\* \* \*

Only 20 more feet. 20 more feet and I'd be safe. Still on my feet, I lurched forward like a snail, my whole body shaking from the cold. One foot after the next.

10 feet. My arms were turning greyish blue, and I had no doubt that my lips were a similar shade. Snow still fell, coming down much harder than it had been earlier. Needless to say, I no longer felt welcomed by it. It wasn't beautiful anymore. It was scary. Everything was scary.

10 feet. I collapsed to the concrete and unleashed a bit of vomit, some of it even running out of my nose. I knelt there in front of our porch, helplessly. I didn't have the energy to carry on. I couldn't do it. Why bother? hissed a voice in the back of my mind.

Taking a shaky breath, I rose to my feet and put one unsteady foot before the next. 5 feet. 4 feet...

Propping myself up against the door, I desperately pressed my pink-gloved hand toward the doorknob. In this neighborhood, everyone left their doors unlocked, a fact for which I was eternally grateful. I tried to turn the knob, but found that my arm was trembling too much. Desperate, I grabbed the knob and turned it with both of my hands, applying as much effort and strength as I could.

The door swung open, and I was greeted by a rush of warmth. Out of energy and full of relief, I fell forward into the house, landing harshly on my side. It was so warm inside that I didn't even care.

\* \* \*

"It's all okay. You're safe now," My Dad said with a tranquil, authoritative voice. Due to the deep concern on his face - I no longer doubted how much he cared about me. He wanted to shield me from danger. I wasn't too excited about being protected, as if I was some sort of princess, but I guess I couldn't blame Dad. As proven by my encounter with Jarvis, I was rather defenseless. I couldn't cry out for help and I was built like a feather. In a household of giants, I was by far the shortest. Dad had well over a full foot of height on me these days.

I thought that I was some sort of superhero when I punched Tina in the gut, but that was just wishful thinking. I'd never been a superhero. I was a pathetic villain, and I'd just had my comeuppance...but I was still scared. Terrified. I'd been a bad person in

the past, and I might have deserved some of Jarvis's ire, but I didn't deserve to be terrorized.

I sighed.

In the back of my mind, a bitter stream of thought began to fight for territory: all could have been avoided if I wasn't forced to walk home alone. Why didn't Megan offer to drive me home? Was her boyfriend more important than I was? I clenched my shaking jaw and couldn't help but feel somewhat bitter. Betrayed by my own sister, too...in a way, this was all her fault. Why wasn't she there for me?

Mom, Dad, and I sat in silence around the fireplace, and I stared emptily into its flames. Empty. That was exactly how I felt. How far was Jarvis willing to go, to get his vengeance? Would he keep ruining me, until my life was totally destroyed? Would he kill me?

After my Dad carried me up the stairs and left me in my bed, I wrapped myself snugly in my blanket, just like I had the other day. It was soothing and grounding...and after what happened with Jarvis, I needed all the security I could get - mentally and physically. Wrapped in my little cocoon, I ran through my options:

First, I could apologize, then hope for the best. He probably wouldn't accept the apology, and I couldn't really blame him. I'd treated him poorly, when I was in a position of power. Terribly, even. If I let Jarvis get his revenge, then there was a small chance that he'd get bored and leave me alone. He hadn't actually hurt me, yet...aside from throwing me through the locker-room wall. What if he escalated that violence, to maim or kill me, before he got bored? Okay, this wasn't a great option. I had two more full years at Cheran High, and I didn't fancy my chances against Jarvis.

Second, I could try to convince my parents to move away from the dystopian hell that Saint Paul had become. That would probably never happen, though...my parents loved this city too much and had steady jobs. The process of moving also took a long time, and I might be dead before we actually finalize anything.

Third, I could run away and beg my parents to give me enough money to survive. If they didn't, I could maybe work odd jobs as a dishwasher and scrounge enough cash to live. Obviously, it'd be hard to keep a well-paying, steady job when I wasn't able to speak. Maybe I could stock shelves somewhere. Perhaps I'd have to stoop much lower. Either way, I'd probably be homeless or living in destitute poverty, but it'd be better than dying...right?

Lastly, I could try to appeal to some authority that was higher than the city of Saint Paul. It was pretty clear that nobody around here was going to be helpful in stopping



Jarvis, but maybe the FBI or something would be able to put him behind bars...or at least get him to stay away from me.

The first three options looked gloomy, but the fourth seemed to be a longshot. It wouldn't surprise me if Jarvis' family influence made him impervious to federal investigations as well, like the Church of Scientology.

With that in mind, I slowly stood up and staggered to my computer. I browsed around Amazon until I found what I needed: one small video camera with express shipping. It was one of the tiny ones that I could hide in my clothing, and I ended up spending almost all of my meager savings on it.

With the click of a button, I'd committed to plan number four. Hopefully I'd be able to capture Jarvis doing something horrible and someone somewhere would be able to bring him to justice. It wasn't the best solution, but it was better than nothing. With a sigh, I trudged back into bed and took a big yawn, sprawling across the sheets like a bear-fur rug. It'd been an exhausting day and my use of adrenaline had left me completely spent.

A light knock rapped on my door. I couldn't give permission to enter, so the door crept open to reveal my Mom.

"Hey sweetie," she began softly, as she took a seat on my bed beside me. She looked at me with pure love, and running comforting hand through my raven hair. "I know you've had a really rough time recently."

I nodded, my jaw still trembling. I wasn't sure if my body shook because of lingering adrenaline or if I was still below optimal core temperature. I still wore wool socks, and some old mittens on my hands, in case it was the latter.

"Horrible things happen and...sometimes there's nothing we can do about it," she closed her piercing blue eyes and sighed. I still hadn't told her exactly what happened, but when she came home and saw me sitting by the fireplace with blue lips and frosty arms, she pieced things together, and realized that someone had stolen my parka. She was a bright lady...I loved her. "It was the Duncan boy, wasn't it?"

I paused before nodding once more. I wasn't going to lie directly to my Mom.

"I'll talk to his parents. I know that there's some history between the two of you, but this has to stop. You can't be fighting with him, not anymore." She stated the words with a motherly determination that I'd witnessed quite often.

My eyes shot wide open and I shook my head frantically. No. If Jarvis got punished, that would only make him more vengeful. I'd be dead before the end of next week.

“I’m not going to let you live in fear. I see it in your eyes, Johanna. You’re terrified all the time. Jarvis’ parents are powerful, but they aren’t evil. They’ll understand and he’ll listen to them.”

I shook my head, more slowly this time, as I pleaded with my eyes. Please, I mouthed. Mom’s intentions were good, but she didn’t understand Jarvis...or did she? Maybe I was just scared about everything. Maybe her diplomatic solution really was the best way to solve my issues with Jarvis. My current method of dealing with him was avoidance, and that was clearly not working.

Bouncing from my bed, I foraged for my whiteboard and wrote: Please don’t. I’ll talk to him. I can handle this. I had to at least attempt to resolve things between me and Jarvis. It couldn’t hurt, could it? Plus, talking to him could help with the sinking sensation that vexed me whenever I tried to recall...Junior High.

“Oh, honey.” She said, petting my long black hair with her hand as if I was a puppy. “Good. You do that. You’re such a sweet girl, sometimes. You’re my little slice of sunshine”

I gave her a sad, weak smile. Part of me was still revolted by the ‘sweet girl’ comment, but it was a small minority within my mind. I love you, I mouthed.

“Love you too.”

# CHAPTER 12

## *Love*

“**A**bsolutely not, young lady.” Mom said sternly. She wasn’t a fun lady to argue with, especially when I couldn’t talk.

I stamped an angry foot on my carpeted floor. Scrubbing the whiteboard with my sleeve, I wrote: But he’s the only person who’s nice to me, and I already promised I’d go.

It was already Friday afternoon and the game was starting in just a couple hours. I’d been bed-ridden all day, but there was no way I was going to bail on Clark. I’d agreed to cheer him on and meet up with him after the game, and that’s exactly what I was going to do.

“Of course he’s nice to you! You’re smart, you’re beautiful, and this boy would be crazy if he didn’t treat you nicely. Still...No. You were attacked and almost froze to death last night.”

I crossed my arms and shot her the harshest glare I could muster. I wasn’t going to be trapped in my room like a victim, fearing the looming threat of Jarvis Duncan. The brute had been on my mind all day and night, and I’d already torn up five different drafts of my apology note. I didn’t know how to put my shame into words, and I desperately needed a break from Mom, from my own self-loathing, and from this prison of a house.

Beyond that, I’d been recovering well and I wasn’t going to let Clark down due to some measly headache.

“Pouting like that isn’t going to help your case.”

I quickly wiped the frown from my face. I wasn’t ‘pouting’, was I? I was trying to frown, not pout like some petulant child. Crap. I sniffed bitterly and brushed my

dangling black hair away from my eye. None of this nonsense would have even happened if it wasn't for Megan. Well...it was my own fault, too, but also Megan's. She needed to see her stupid boyfriend, and made me walk home alone. How could she be so selfish?

I know how to remove the screen from my window, I presented the words on my whiteboard, which drew a scowl from Mom. I'd rather not sneak out and brave the long, cold walk to the football field. My threat was truly more of a bluff.

"You're even more stubborn than me." She shook her head, as I prepared my next message.

I promise I'll text you every twenty minutes

She sighed and I could tell she was seriously considering my offer. When she shrugged her shoulders helplessly, I knew I'd won. "Every fifteen minutes, and you'd better be careful."

My face lit up as soon as the words passed her lips, and I got up from bed to embrace her in a tight hug.

Thank you! I squealed silently into her chest.

"If you get hurt, then I'm the world's worst mother."

\* \* \*

Mom dropped me off at the school's barren, frosted field, where each blade of grass stood frigid in the chill air. There were a good amount of people in the snow-covered stands, but the game wasn't set to start for another half-hour. A small part of me had wanted to wear something that would grab Clark's attention or at least display some of my figure, but Mom made sure that I was bundled up like an Inuit baby. Four layers of clothing with wool mittens, furry boots, two layers of socks, and a thick beanie.

Caroline had texted me and said she'd be waiting in the stands, and I found her without incident. She was sitting next to several other girls, all chatting amongst themselves.

"You made it!" Caroline embraced me in a hug. We were both dressed for the cold, so it was like two panda bears sharing an embrace.

"Have you come to any of our games before?" She asked eagerly.

Of course, I shook my head No with a weak, inaudible scoff. I'd never really been much of a football fan. Guys smacking into each other with pads was never really my cup of tea.

"Do you know how the game works?"

I nodded my head after a moment of hesitation. My grandfather had taken me to a couple Vikings games when I was younger, although that was years ago. I was aware of the basics: that there was an egg-shaped ball that you were supposed to score with. I knew the positions and some of the basic rules, but I was certainly no expert. Would Caroline have even asked me that question if I was still a guy?

“Oh hey, I’m Olivia,” the girl sitting next to Carolina chimed in. She must have been one of Caroline’s friends. “I don’t think we’ve met, but I was sitting nearby at lunch. Your scarf was really cute, by the way. I wanted to tell you, but I never got the chance. Is it from Norway?”

I shook my head. It wasn’t Norwegian, but I was a bit flattered by the fact that she thought it was. Thanks, I mouthed with a blush. So, Olivia had been the unknown brunette chatting with Clark. She was pretty, with lovely hazel eyes and a cute, slightly mischievous smile. Was she my competition? Was she going to get jealous? Were she and Clark already dating? Maybe the whole thing about him having a crush on me had just been Caroline’s sisterly teasing. Perhaps he didn’t have any interest in me at all. My stomach began to sink.

“My boyfriend is on the team, so I never miss a game.” Olivia smiled sweetly.

Boyfriend? I mouthed, lifting an eyebrow to let her know it was a question. I had to repeat the word three or four times for her, before her eyes lit up in realization.

“Yeah, Brandon. He’s a linebacker.” Her cheeks flushed, and I smiled back pleasantly. Awesome, I thought with a wave of relief. Olivia wasn’t competition.

Olivia gestured around us. “Basically, all of the girls in this section are either family or girlfriends of people on the team.” There were about 10 or so other girls around us.

Oh I mouthed silently, suddenly feeling slightly out of place. Hopefully these girls would be welcoming of an outsider with limited football knowledge.

\* \* \*

A few minutes before kickoff, the stands filled with students and alumni. As it did, I sat and listened to Caroline and Olivia’s conversation. Without my whiteboard on hand, I felt as if I wasn’t able to contribute to the discussion in a meaningful way. I ended up just smiling and nodding, offering a mouthed word here and there. Thankfully, none of the conversation seemed to revolve around me. Instead, Caroline and Olivia were chatting about Caroline’s love life. As I learned, Caroline was single and had been for quite some time.

“What about that one guy you told me about?” Olivia asked as she breathed onto her gloved hands in an effort to lend them heat.

“It didn’t work out,” she broke eye contact with Olivia to send me a mournful side glance. “So it goes.” Wait...why’d she look at me like that? There was something in her eyes...as if she needed to tell me something. Some sort of secret.

Suddenly, it all clicked. She’d had a crush on me, hadn’t she? When I was a guy, she sat next to me every day. She often stared at me, but I guess she never mustered the courage to talk to me. With a pang of remorse and guilt, a sad thought entered my mind: If she had talked to me when I was a guy, she probably would’ve realized that I wasn’t interested, and that I was an asshole. I wasn’t the same person anymore, though. At least, I was trying not to be the same person.

She must have been devastated when I changed sexes...or not. On my first day back, she had actually struck up a conversation with me, although she had seemed a bit nervous. Was she still attracted to me? I took out the one small piece of ripped paper that I’d brought with me, scrawling a message with all of my questions to her as snow began to dot the paper. Luckily, my condition allowed me to pass notes without people finding it odd. Olivia probably thought nothing of it when I handed the paper to Caroline.

I studied Caroline’s face carefully as she read about my discoveries. Her eyebrows rose and she parted her lips ever-so-slightly, erasing any doubt from my mind: I’d guessed correctly. With my pen, Caroline’s shaky, gloved hand wrote back: I did find you attractive when you were a guy, and I was sad at first when I heard about what happened. I’m straight so I don’t really have feelings like that for you anymore, but now you’re my friend.

Reading the note, I smiled faintly and fought off my urge to hug her. My friend, she’d called me. We were officially friends.! I had a friend. A real-life friend!

“Johanna,” Caroline took our silent conversation into the speaking realm. “Olivia and I were going to have a sleepover tomorrow night. How would you like to join us? Maybe you and Clark could work on your project together.”

Her strategic stress on ‘Clark’ and ‘project’ was either designed to push me toward accepting her offer, or it was her way of teasing me. Maybe it was a mix of both. In the end, her wording had proven to be convincing. I grinned nervously and tilted my head in a hesitant nod.

A sleepover...I could only imagine the possibilities. What was I signing up for? I’d never taken part in a sleepover before. Hell, I couldn’t even remember the last time I visited a non-family-member’s house. What were we going to do? Was it going to be

like movies portrayed it, where we'd paint each others' nails and play Truth or Dare? If so, well...actually, that didn't sound too bad. I'd get to know Olivia and Caroline better, and they'd be able to teach me a thing or two about being a girl. Learning about makeup and whatnot was a scary notion, but girlhood was a challenge that I would have to confront eventually.

The football game was exciting but I had no idea what I was doing, so I just cheered when Caroline and Olivia cheered. The truth was, I didn't know as much about football as I thought I did. Instead, I spent most of the game watching Clark, hoping that he didn't get hurt. He was the quarterback and he got hit really hard by defenders a couple of times. Each time he did, I let out quiet gasp and my heart sunk.

As we watched, I admitted to Olivia that I didn't actually know how the sport worked. She spent much of the game explaining different aspects of the game to me, but was respectful as she did. I always assumed those girls who went to football games were just jock-crazy and went to gossip and stuff, but they actually all seemed very invested and knowledgeable - especially Olivia.

"And you see that yellow flag that the zebra just threw?" Olivia asked, carefully watching my response with her beautiful hazel eyes, her chilly clouds of breath aimed in my direction.

Zebra? I mouthed in reply.

"The ref. You know, the referee. Some people call them zebras because they wear those black and white striped shirts."

I nodded in understanding, licking my lips and finding that they were weather-beaten and parched. Crap. If Clark and I were 'hanging out' after the game, I'd need to look my best. With that, I pulled out some chapstick and lined my cold lips. I rolled my lips together a couple of times, using one of my longish fingernails to clear off the excess chapstick.

"That flag means that one of the offensive players moved before the ball was snapped," she explained.

But why couldn't they move before the ball was snapped? Isn't that how they got to lineup positions in the first place, after they left their 'huddle'? I had so many questions, but the only piece of paper I'd brought was already marked with two unerasable and deeply personal notes dealing with both myself and Caroline. As a result, all I could do was nod along, acting as if I understood everything. It really wasn't Olivia's fault...this was just one of the many limitations that my condition imposed. The world wasn't always fair.

Olivia was a sweetie, and she taught me a whole bunch of things, like why you didn't want your punts to go into the end-zone, and why the opposing team had been allowed to recover their own kickoff. I pretty much followed her lead throughout the game. Whenever Olivia cheered, I cheered along silently. We had plenty to cheer about, as well. Apparently our team crushed theirs, because the final scoreboard read Home 54, Visitor 14.

\* \* \*

After the game, I leaned against Clark's red pickup in the parking lot. Standing there waiting for him, I barely noticed that the air was freezing cold. My whole body was pulsing with warmth, excited beyond words. As I waited, I also took a couple nervous glances around, on the lookout for Jarvis, Tina and their band of sycophants. If they ruined my night, I'd undoubtedly cry myself to sleep.

"Hey," I heard a familiar voice behind me, right as I sent my Mom yet another update text.

I spun around and found myself face-to-face with Clark. He'd already changed out of his padded uniform, but he was still sweaty.

For some reason, his smell was delicious. His lips were only about a foot away from mine, although I'd have to stand on my tiptoes to reach them.

He raised a trembling hand and ran it through my hair, moving my black locks away from my face and tucking them under my beanie. I knew exactly what he was doing. I'd read about this online, during my preparation for this date: he was gauging to see if I was willing to kiss him. Was I? A civil war raged within my head. If I moved away or recoiled when he touched my hair, that would be the signal that I wasn't ready, but I froze and did neither of those things.

He was handsome and kind, but...but he was a guy. If I showed too much affection for him, would I be losing myself? Would I be surrendering my will to Jarvis's terrible wish? But what would happen if I let this opportunity slip through my grasp? How much happiness would I lose, if I spurned Clark's advances? How distraught would he be...and for what? To prove that I was stronger than my own emotions?

Eventually, the resistance within me caved. I laid a slender, gloved hand on top of his, then brought his hand to rest on my cheek. His hands seemed so massive compared to mine. Slowly, he traced along my lips with his thumb. As he did, we stared into each other's eyes. Damn, he was handsome.

"Did you enjoy the game?" He asked.



I nodded my head and gave him an unintentionally dreamy smile. His finger continued to travel slowly across my lips, outlining their fullness. Geez, I was glad that I'd remembered to bring my chapstick.

"Did you happen to see the scouts?"

No, I mouthed, tilting my head to the side inquisitively. Apparently, there was something funny about the way I tilted my head. As he watched me, Clark's lips parted into a caring smile, and a few chuckles even escaped his throat.

"You're something, aren't you?" He laughed, his finger still resting on my lower lip. "There were football scouts at the game, from Minnesota. They were watching me play. You know, for a scholarship."

My eyebrows shot up, and he knew exactly what I was about to say.

"Yeah, I know, I know. I'm only a sophomore. They start scouting early, though. I don't have to commit to a college for another year, at least."

With that, I licked my lips and looked up at him, giving him my best attempt at 'bedroom eyes.' He was so incredible, and made me feel so...special. I wanted him. Maybe I was a loser for giving up so easily to my feelings, but I wanted him.

To my dismay, he didn't seem to pick up on my kiss invitation. Instead, he held my gaze and stared down at me, his heart pounding audibly in his chest. Still, though, he didn't stoop down and kiss me. Was he clueless, or was he not interested in me anymore? If I was a bolder woman, I would have reached up and initiated the kiss, but I couldn't muster the courage. Maybe he was having the same dilemma, despite being an attractive jock. Did he know how handsome he was?

"So," Clark scratched his neck awkwardly, pulling back from our embrace. "Want to grab some food? I'm starving." He pulled out his keys and unlocked his truck as he spoke.

Fighting back my disappointment, I strode to the passenger door and hopping inside. Why hadn't he kissed me? Maybe he was waiting...a new kind of anticipation was causing my heart to race and my legs to bounce. It was the thrill of the unknown, of uncharted waters and a budding relationship. Anything could happen. However, one question continued to occupy my buzzing mind: when was he going to kiss me?

\* \* \*

"So, what do you do in your spare time?" Clark asked, as we sat across from each other at the diner. Our hot chocolates had arrived, but we were still waiting on the food. Clark had originally floated the idea of sharing some pop - Diet Coke, he

suggested. I shut that down awfully quick. It was far too cold for pop, and I never drank it anyways, because it made my head hurt and I didn't like the way that the tiny carbonated bubbles tickled my throat.

Because it was quite late, the diner was mostly empty and we got a nice booth all to ourselves. I loved booths, and my butt - tired from sitting on the cold bleachers - appreciated the cushioning.

I bit my lip and started to throw some words together in sign language.

"You're...learning sign language?"

I nodded, happy that he understood what I was getting at. Although we'd only spent maybe 10 hours together in total, Clark seemed to understand me very well. I seldom needed to explain things or write them down for him. It made me feel warm inside.

"That's cool," he grinned. "That's really cool. Did you start that recently?"

I nodded once more, flashing a grin. I'd started learning after I lost my voice, but he likely suspected as much. It seemed as if Clark wanted to avoid discussing the fact that I couldn't speak, for which I was grateful. I tried not to fixate on it myself, as thoughts about my disability often steered me toward negativity, forcing me to confront the fact that I'd never lead a completely 'normal' life.

"Do you have any other hobbies?"

I hesitated for a moment before holding my hands out in front of me, holding onto an invisible game controller. Mashing non-existent buttons, I mimed the act of playing video games until he realized what I meant. Obviously, I spent more time playing on PC than console, but it was harder to mime PC gaming. Glancing up at Clark, I bit my lip, fearing his reaction.

To my surprise, Clark's eyes lit up. I entirely expected him to laugh at me and think I was some giant nerd, but instead he seemed very interested. My heart leapt with elation, and I struggled to keep the grin off of my face.

"Sweet, me too. Have you played Fallout?"

Just like that, we dove into the beautiful rabbit hole that only forms when two people discover a shared interest. The conversation was obviously a bit one-sided, but we chatted about all of the various games that we both play. Clark seemed to be a big fan of the single-player adventure genre. I'd dabbled with those games before, but I was always a sucker for multiplayer shooters. Regardless, we overlapped on a few games, and had plenty to discuss until our food arrived.

The meal was delicious, and I was starving. Being the classy folks we were, we'd both gotten cheeseburgers and fries, with milkshakes to wash it all down. Okay,

well...I got one cheeseburger and Clark ordered three for himself, but I suppose those calories were required after running up and down the football field for so long.

When I let Clark order for me, I was pleased with his choice. He hadn't ordered me a salad or something, which would have seriously pissed me off for multiple reasons: First, I was hungry. Second, I may have had the appearance of a little weakling, but I didn't want to be treated like one. I definitely wasn't a victim. I wasn't even a villain...not anymore. What was I, then? A former villain? A recovering asshole? I had no clue. I was just...me.

We exited the restaurant hand-in-hand, and ventured once more into the stretch of bitter cold between the building and his truck.

The drive back to my house was exciting in the most incredible of ways. Clark didn't speak in the truck, so there was a peculiar silence. It wasn't a bad silence or a heavy silence. Rather, it was a warm silence. The unique kind of quiet that two people share when they have said all the words they wished to say, and couldn't be happier.

Holding his hand, I looked out the passenger-side window. It was dark and I could only barely make out the wild flurries of snow sauntering down to the ground. I wasn't paying them much mind, though. My thoughts were zooming like bees around a hive, that hive being one person: Clark.

What did the future hold for us? Was I going to be his girlfriend? His prom date? What about college, would we go to the same one? I bet he'd end up going somewhere on a football scholarship or something. Would we ever get married?

Yeah...we'd live together in a nice house, hopefully here in St. Paul. I could just imagine our little kids running around. Would their hair be blonde like his or black like mine? Maybe something in between, like a chocolate brown color. I'd have to raise the kids with him...how would I raise kids without being able to teach them how to talk? How would I sing them lullabies?

My eyes started to well with water once more, and Clark seemed to pick up on it without even looking at me. He gave my hand a light squeeze and I fought off the tears. We were going to be alright. I was just thinking too far into the future. We hadn't even shared a kiss yet.

"Here we are," Clark smiled over at me as his truck rolled to a stop outside of my house. Ever the gentleman, he walked around to open my door for me and help me down. Although his truck was pretty tall, none of that was truly necessary. I could've stepped down on my own. However, I didn't complain. In fact, I almost squealed as his muscular arms wrapped around my waist and carefully moved me down until my feet touched the ground. As we walked to the door together, his hand wrapped around my

waist, I didn't even notice the falling snow. Upon reaching the front door, we embraced in a hug and he angled my face up toward his.

We stood like that, for what could have been seconds, minutes, or hours. His eyes seemed to sparkle in the porch-light, and my fingers trembled, goosebumps popping up along my arms.

Then, he moved his lips toward mine. Thank God I'd thought to bring that tube of chapstick, because my lips were moisturized, and well-prepared. When our lips touched, it was like a firework had just gone off. He pressed me against a white column and worked his lips against mine. Despite the cold, his lips were still soft and pleasant. Turning my head slightly to the side with his strong hands, his tongue started to dance with mine inside of my mouth. As we kissed, I let out a little moan. Had it been audible? I wasn't sure. In hindsight, probably not.

For some reason, a thought planted itself in the back of my mind: what if - somehow - by kissing Clark, I managed to regain my voice? What if that would break the wish?

With that in mind, I kissed even harder and clung to Clark as if he was my champion. Each time his tongue pressed against mine, my heart raced and I almost squealed from excitement. A week ago, we'd hardly known each other, but now I would have done anything for him. I wanted to be his.

Tenderly, but still more quickly than I'd like, he pulled away and ended the kiss. His tongue had made my heart flutter, and I thought I was in heaven. He was more than a good kisser. My heart did not just sing for his tongue. I cared for him. He was perfect in every way.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered into my ear, melting my heart.

"I'm yours," I whispered back into his ear, but no words came out. I was mildly disappointed to realize that my theory was wrong, and my voice hadn't returned. However, part of me was glad he hadn't heard it. It was a bit premature to be telling him something like that. My cheeks burned with a deep blush. Did I really feel that way about him?

We stared into each other's eyes for a few minutes, just like we had back in the cafeteria. Around us, flurries of snow drifted upward and downward, guided by invisible whistling wind.

With a warm hand, Clark stroked my cheek and brushed a lock of hair out of my eyes.

"Did you have a good time?" He asked, and I nodded vigorously. "We should do this again...we can go somewhere fancy if you want." His eyes looked so magical and

caring, I would have agreed to just about anything. "Do you want to go out on Tuesday night?"

I grinned a giddy smile and licked my lips, tasting the remnants of Clark's presence. I'd love to, I mouthed. Just being with him made me feel so warm inside...I had no idea how I'd survived living in such solitude before.

He looked a little taken aback at first, then a smile spread across his face. "I love you, too."

It was my turn to be shocked, and I think he picked up on his mistake immediately. He...he loved me? Did he even know me? This was our first date, and it was only just barely an actual date. Less than a week ago, we hadn't even known each other...but he loved me now? He didn't know about the terrible things I'd done, or how I could be a dark cloud, sucking away other people's happiness. Did I even deserve to be loved by him?

My jaw trembled and tears started to well in my eyes. 'No, Johanna,' I ordered myself. 'Don't cry in front of him. He'll think it's his fault.'

"That's, uh...That's not what you said, is it?" Sensing my uncertainty, he eased out of our embrace. He hesitated, as if he was about to follow up with an apology.

I wasn't sure what to do, or what to say. Surely, denying my feelings for him wouldn't help anything. But did I actually love him? Did I know him well enough to love him? If I told him I loved him, would I regret it later? I hadn't ever loved anyone before in a relationship kind've way, so I wasn't sure. I was certain, however, that I felt something different when I was with him. Something unique. I decided to put my worries aside and - for perhaps the first time in my life - just cherish the moment.

I love you, I mouthed with a weak grin. The look of elation and adoration on his face was unmistakable. Even if I ended up regretting those three powerful words, the joy they brought to him was invaluable. Out of words, we smiled and stared deep into each other's eyes. I loved him. I loved Clark...and I'd told him as much.

After what seemed like an eternity, he leaned down and kissed me one more time. Fireworks sparked as our lips met and my heart pounded with excitement.

"See you later," Clark whispered into my ears, as his hot breath made my cheeks tingle.

With one last peck on the cheek, he headed back toward his truck, and left me bouncing with glee on the porch.

\* \* \*

Dashing inside my house, I was surprised to see that my entire family had gathered at the kitchen window, presumably to watch Clark and I kiss. Oh crap.

"Who is he?" Dad's stern voice was the first thing to greet me. He walked over to me and put a hand on my shoulder, inspecting my face to make sure that everything was alright. The expression he wore was a familiar one: I'd seen it every time Megan had come home with a new date. He wanted to guard me and make sure I wasn't making a mistake.

"Clark Nordquist. He's a football star, A-student. You don't have much to worry about." Megan reassured him, and I sent her a thankful nod. I was still a bit peeved at her for not picking me up after detention, but I'd give her a chance to earn forgiveness.

Although Megan was a cheerleader, she hadn't been at the game because it was far too cold for cheerleading. It was often of an indoor and spring/summer sport at this latitude, although sometimes they cheered at football games - if the weather allowed it.

"Well, I'd like to meet him." Dad insisted, and I gave him a courteous nod.

Before Dad could make any more demands, Megan grabbed my hand and basically dragged me up to her room. She clicked the door shut behind us. From the expression on her face, it seemed like she was almost more excited about my night with Clark than I had been, and she rushed to her desk and bringing me paper and a pen.

"Tell me everything!" She ordered with a squeal, bouncing on her bed. When she admitted that she always wanted a little sister, she hadn't been lying. I was starting to see a side to her that I'd never known before: she was funny, kind of friendly, and she actually seemed interested in my life. I loved it...I loved her.

I bit my lip and took a sigh, then started writing. I decided not to leave anything out...she was my sister, after all. There was no point in lying to her.

"Are you serious? He told you he loved you? On your first date?" She looked bewildered as she read my summary, and I didn't know if she thought it was a good thing or a bad thing.

I love him, I mouthed.

"Oh my God, you're like a little lovesick puppy." She embraced me in a tight hug, her arms wrapping around me. She was the perfect height for hugs, and my head fit snugly below her chin. "That's too cute! I can't wait to see the two of you together! I always knew you were gay, by the way."

My eyes went wide.

"Or straight now, or whatever," she added quickly. "Not sure how that works. But I bet you spent half of your date just staring at him dreamily, didn't you?"

I considered lying, but decided against it. Instead, I giggled and nodded.

After she finished joining me in laughter, Megan took a deep breath and changed her tone. Instead of jubilant cheerfulness, her expression was that of a sage, exuding wisdom.

“Believe it or not, but I’ve been in your exact same position before. I know exactly how you feel.”

Really?

“Of course,” she wrapped an arm around my shoulder and sighed.

“When I first met John, I couldn’t stop thinking about him. I mean, I didn’t tell him that I loved him until we’d been dating for a year, but...I get it. I daydreamed about the way he smelled, the way he talked and walked...everything about him was just amazing. I used to spend my time fantasizing about raising a family with him and all sorts of stuff like that.”

I blushed, having just done that same thing with Clark back in the car. My sister had been in a relationship with John since 8th grade, and everyone assumed that they were going to get married someday. I had no idea how they managed to stay together whereas all of her friends bounced from guy to guy.

“I’ve been where you are and, I guess what I mean to say is...things aren’t always going to be so peachy. He’s never going to be as perfect as you imagine he is. I’ve seen tons of relationships fall apart because people have these unrealistic standards for each other. You guys are going to disagree and you’re going to fight and you’re going to start questioning whether or not your relationship was really meant to last. You’ll wonder whether or not the two of you were actually a perfect match, or - even worse - you might start thinking that he changed and he isn’t the guy you fell in love with.”

She closed her eyes and inhaled sharply. “The truth is, he probably didn’t change, you were just too caught up in his perfection to notice his flaws. There’s no such thing as true love or soulmates or a perfect guy. Just make sure that you’re being fair to him and that he’s being fair to you, okay?”

I nodded slowly. If he had any flaws, I hadn’t discovered them yet...but she knew a lot more about this stuff than I did, so I took her words to heart. I’d be fair to him, I’d be forgiving, I’d be reasonable. I’d be the best girlfriend in the world.

# CHAPTER 13

## *Burnt Waffles*

I didn't actually sleep last night. I might've drifted off once or twice, but my heart raced for hours and my thoughts were all spiraling around one person: Clark. I'd thought through just about every possibility with our relationship, charting out our lives with a gleeful smile. We were going to be an awesome couple. I realized that Megan had warned me against all of the fantasizing and lovey-dovey dreaming, but I couldn't help it.

Megan seemed to be genuinely concerned about me when she'd sat me down and given me the 'love-talk', as I'd decided to call it. As a result, I'd mostly forgiven her for ditching me and making me walk home after detention, the other day. Mostly. In the back of my mind, annoyance still lingered, and I considered discussing the whole incident with her, and maybe demanding an apology. I'd never talked with her about any of my personal qualms before, though. Not until I wrote her that note last week.

That note had seemed to have helped repair my relationship with Megan, at least a little bit. Hopefully, my note to Jarvis would be equally effective. That particular note was still highly theoretical, existing only within my mind, and even there it was rather vague. What could I possibly write to him? A simple apology? I'd been such an asshole to him...it was hard to face. Even merely thinking about writing that note made me recall how I'd berated him for months on end, which made my stomach twist with guilt.

I finally rolled out of bed when light began creeping into my room, the morning sun's thin lines peering through my shuttered blinds. Megan and I weren't leaving for the mall for another hour or two, so that gave me some more time to prepare.



I took a while to pick out my outfit, despite my severely limited selection. I settled on a cute red turtleneck and tight jeans, keeping it super simple. Like all my clothing, they were Megan's hand-me-downs. The clothes I'd gotten from my big sister were nice enough, but I couldn't wait to buy something of my own. I never imagined I'd be looking forward to a shopping trip, but...I'd been surprising myself a lot recently.

Heading downstairs, I noticed that nobody was up yet. It was a Saturday, after all, everyone's favorite sleep-in day. I decided to surprise the family by cooking some breakfast. It was my way of thanking them for being so nice and understanding to me recently, I guess. They could have rejected me and kicked me out of the house, but instead they smothered me with love. Although Megan and I had a bit of a rocky road, I couldn't have imagined having a better pair of parents. Cooking for them was the least I could do.

After surveying the ingredients we had on hand, I decided it was going to be waffles with whipped cream and strawberries on top. I wasn't super experienced, so I accidentally let the first waffle burn to a crisp in the iron. They even left the kitchen smelling smokey, and I was forced to open the window, whose sill rested just above the sink. Outside, the birds chirped their high-pitched songs and a mourning dove cooed its beautiful, lulling tune, bringing a small grin to my face. It seemed as if the whole world was asleep, tossing its reins to me and a choir of birds. I stood there and listened to them for a few moments, and couldn't help but think of them as my friends. They sang for me, filling the room with music. I began to shimmy and sway to the chirping birds as I prepared a new batch of waffles. I almost certainly looked like a complete dork, and anybody who happened to stumble into the kitchen would laugh at me, but I didn't care. I was having fun.

Despite my initial cooking failure, I learned from my mistakes and the next few waffles came out perfectly. In both video games and real life, I was nothing if not persistent. I'd learn and practice until I won.

I sliced up the strawberries and arranged them into careful circles within each waffle, with a dollop of cream in the middle. In the end, the waffles looked as if they'd been cooked up by some fancy restaurant. Presentation was important, as Mom had taught me the other morning.

I'd never really dedicated so much time in preparing food, and I certainly never decorated it so meticulously...but it was actually kind've fun. After testing my work and helping myself to a delicious waffle, I grabbed one of the prepared plates and scampered upstairs. If I wasn't holding a plate in one hand, I would have run up the

stairs on all fours like a dog, as I often did when I was excited. With a proud smile, I placed two soft knocks on Megan's door.

"Come in," Megan called. It sounded like her voice was coming from the bathroom attached to her room. Balancing the plate carefully on my arm like a waitress, I opened the door and stepped inside. The ceramic plate was surprisingly heavy, but I clenched my teeth and gripped it tightly.

"Are you serious? Waffles?" She giggled when she saw me, before becoming much more serious. "Did you make these by yourself?"

I nodded, a lock of raven hair falling over my eye as I did. I guess Megan figured that Mom wasn't awake yet, which was a safe assumption. Both of my parents liked to sleep in on the weekends, and I couldn't blame them. If I worked a 9 to 5 job, I'd probably snooze as often as possible. I slept in almost every weekend myself, but that was more due to my habit of staying up late playing video games.

"What's going on with you? I mean, I love it...but this isn't you. Was there another part to the wishes or something? Something that changed your personality?"

Genuinely puzzled, I just shook my head. No. I was still myself...I hoped. I was just trying to turn over a new leaf. I mean, some stuff did change against my will - my sexuality for instance - but I was the same person as before...wasn't I? I suppose I wasn't too confident about my answer.

"You know, you can tell me if you aren't actually Joseph. If this is all some elaborate impersonation act. I won't mind. You don't move like him, you don't walk like him. You're just...you're too damned sweet to be him."

I shook my head once more and flashed a grin. I'm your sister. I wasn't Joseph anymore, that much was certain, but I used to be. I couldn't ignore my past.

"Okay, I believe you...but that's only because you don't wear makeup and your ears aren't pierced," she grinned, as she ran a brush through her hair. "Leave the plate on my bed, then I'll do your makeup."

I was eager to put down the plate, because it was getting fairly heavy. As I did, my heart started to race. Makeup. I'd been afraid of the idea of wearing makeup for a long time, ever since I turned into a girl. However, fears were meant to be conquered. If I never tried my hand at new tasks, I'd never learn anything.

"So," Megan began by pushing me into a sitting position on her bathroom stool. This was only the second time I'd stepped foot in her bathroom, the first being when I stole her hairbrush earlier in the week. It was a much bigger than my bathroom, which I suppose made sense. She used hers more often, and almost the entire counter was lined with various beauty products. "Watch everything I do. I'll try to explain as I go,

but if you need me to go into details, just...I don't know, nudge me or something. Okay?"

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded, and she began working her magic. I tried not to close my eyes, paying close attention as she laid foundation onto my skin and layered it. My face didn't have many blemishes, but after a few moments of Megan's hard work, my skin was immaculate.

"You've got really thick lashes. You're rocking that natural smokey-eyed look, but we're going to amp that up," she explained as she painted around my eyes. I wasn't exactly sure what she meant by that, but I nodded nevertheless.

I tried not to fidget when she began working around my eyes, despite the uneasiness which came with somebody touching my eyelashes. I kept one eye open as she drew on eyeliner, paying careful attention to her practiced strokes. Her hand moved with the confident swiftness of a pro, and it wasn't long before she pulled out a tube of stuff that went on my lips. Gloss, I guess it was called.

"Stop smiling!" Megan ordered with a giggle, as she stopped spreading gloss across my lips. "Keep your lips together, and stop moving." I wasn't sure if it was the funny sensation or excitement, but I couldn't help myself...I had to smile.

Sorry, I mouthed, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath. Ever so slowly, I wiped the grin from my face.

"I knew you were pretending that you didn't enjoy this," she tisked, returning to the process of coating my lips with gloss. "There's nothing wrong with looking pretty, is there?"

Still fighting off a grin, I shook my head, which drew another scowl from Megan.

"I told you not to move, dammit."

Slowly but surely, Megan crafted my face into something entirely different. Well, maybe that was an exaggeration...she definitely exposed a deeper level of beauty that had been previously lurking below my skin's surface. I didn't pay attention to how long she took, but it couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes before she took a step back and announced that she was done.

Holy shit, I mouthed, gaping at myself in the mirror and shaking my head. I remembered most of the tidbits of advice she'd given as she went along, but it'd probably take me loads of practice to replicate something like this. It was just so complicated, between all of the different tools and layers and whatnot.

"I know," she smiled smugly at me. "You could walk onto the cover of just about any fashion magazine."

I rolled my eyes playfully. Megan was the model, not me. Between her height and her dazzling looks, I was honestly surprised that she wasn't already on every magazine cover. Megan was doing a bit of modeling as a side job and a summer job, but it seemed like she wanted to pursue higher education and a more guaranteed career path. I guess there were a lot of aspiring models and pretty girls in the world, though, so I couldn't fault her decision-making. Only a handful of girls would actually become supermodels.

Still staring at Megan, I began compared the two of us...she had an extremely pretty face, but it was her killer body and height that made her perfect for modeling. In a way, I was opposite: I was shorter and my body wasn't quite as majestic. My ass and boobs were both smaller, and my figure wasn't jaw-dropping. On the other hand, my face was slightly more perfect than hers. My eyebrows arched a bit higher, my blue eyes were larger, and my chin was more delicately sloped. Maybe I did have a shot at being a model...perhaps a makeup model or something?

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After Megan ate her breakfast, we were on our way. I bounced in the passenger seat of her car as we blasted some admittedly girly music. I used to hate that kind of music, but I was slowly warming up to it. Some of the songs were really catchy, although I'd never be able to sing along. That didn't stop me from trying, though. When Megan saw me jiggling around and mouthing the words to a pop song, she laughed so hard that she almost cried. Of course, she also joined in with the singing, with her honey-alto voice. I fought back a pang of jealousy, and ultimately succeeded. It wasn't her fault that she had a voice and I didn't. With determination, I put a smile back onto my face and continued my silly lip-syncing dance routine.

By the time we got to the mall, Sarah was already there waiting for us. Apparently, none of their other friends could make it so it would just be the three of us. I was quietly elated. I didn't know their other friends very well, and didn't want to feel like a complete outsider. With only Megan and Sarah present, the whole excursion seemed less daunting.

"This is so exciting!" Sarah squealed as we greeted each other with a hug. "Your first mall trip!"

Sarah seemed even more jazzed about this than I did, although it certainly wasn't my 'first mall trip'. I guess it was my first time shopping as Johanna, though. This was going to be a whole different ballgame. I considered asking Sarah why she was so

excited, but that was a lot of words to share and I hadn't brought anything with which I could write. Crap. I made a mental note to bring some sort of writing device with me wherever I went. Maybe a tiny whiteboard that could fit in my purse, or a stack of post-its. I guess I did have my phone with me, though, so I could communicate if need be.

The mall was buzzing with activity, as its central heating and movie theatre were quite alluring on such a cold Saturday. 'Winter is for learning,' my grandfather had often told me while we sat in the safety of my grandparents' house, watching the winter storms pass. His rationale was that there weren't many other productive activities to do in winter, other than staying inside and exploring the world from behind window-glass. Would he be proud of me if he could see me now? I suppose he would...I was learning all sorts of new facts, tasks, and skills, all at a lightning pace.

As the three of us walked through the mall's wide thoroughfares, I couldn't help but feel like people were staring at us. I guess it made sense, though. If I was still a guy, I'd probably be eyeing our trio as well. We were dressed for winter with long-sleeve outfits, but our slim feminine figures were still in clear sight, on display for the world to see. I suspected that most of the eyes were on Sarah and Megan, though. They certainly had more to offer below the neck than I did. Hell, Sarah's face was just as pretty as mine, too, even with my beautifully-applied makeup. She always looked amazing. I grinned, carefully striding between them in my heels. As a trio we looked damned good, and I couldn't deny the pride I felt about that. Megan was right: there was nothing wrong with looking pretty.

Because I'd gushed to Megan all about Clark and revealed how much I cared about him, the chief priority of the shopping trip was preparing me for our upcoming dinner date. First things first, Sarah and Megan dragged me into a cosmetics store, where they picked out a makeup kit for me. After selecting some new hair and body care products - most of which smelt unmistakably fruity, we headed toward a clothing store.

"I can't believe you survived so long without a hair dryer...one whole week!" Sarah scoffed, gesturing toward the new appliance in my shopping bag.

I shrugged in response as our trio entered the first of many clothing stores. My hair was certainly long - a wave of black reaching down to just above the small of my back - but I usually either avoided washing it or accepted that it would be a bit wet. I tried to explain that when the two of them tossed the dryer into our basket, but they weren't having it. Apparently, having long hair and not using a blowdryer was sacrilege. I guess that meant I had to learn the ins and outs of one more device.

"So, I was thinking a blue dress would look awesome on you," Sarah stated, nodding her head in my direction.

I furrowed my eyebrows and shot her a quizzical expression. A dress? She wanted me to wear a dress? Both Sarah and Megan seemed to ignore my hesitation, dashing between the rows like buzzing bees.

Before long, they were shoving handfuls of clothing into my arms. They'd picked out a whole assortment of clothes, mostly limited to skirts and nice dresses. Certainly nothing that could be described as masculine, but that was okay...wasn't it? I wasn't a guy anymore, so I couldn't really complain. With my arms full, they herded me toward the dressing rooms and insisted that I try on each one of the outfits.

Alone in the wood-walled room, I selected one of the dresses, which was a shade of sapphire blue. I assumed this was the one that Sarah had picked out. Of the skirts and dresses that the pair had given me, the blue dress was undoubtedly the fanciest-looking and most elegant. For some reason, I gravitated toward it. Hell, if I had to try on a bunch of dresses, I might as well try the nicest one first. Staring into the tiny body mirror in the changing stall, I held the dress below my neck anxiously. How would it look on me?

'Screw it,' I thought to myself, remembering my promise to Megan the night before. If this is what it would take to make Clark happy for our upcoming fancy date, I'd try it on.

After peeling off my tight jeans and struggling to slide into the dress, I took a quick glance in the mirror. Oh shit, I was looking good. Beautiful, even. Megan's makeup had worked wonders, and the dress matched my eyes in a really beautiful way, the blue hues accentuating my irises. The dress was fairly long, hugging my legs and leaving space at the top for a bit of cleavage to show through. Gripping my sides, it brought attention to my slender figure and gave me the aesthetic hint of an hourglass. A smile crept onto my face once more. We were a match made in heaven. Even before I stepped out of the dressing room stall to show Sarah and Megan, I knew it was a winner.

"Oh my God, you owe me \$10!" Sarah giggled to Megan as I exited the stall. Apparently, my decision regarding what to try on first had been the subject of a bet between the pair.

I did a slow spin and rolled my eyes as they ogled at me cheerily and complimented the dress. I guess the decision was made, then. This was the dress I was going to wear to my date. Did that mean our shopping adventure was already coming to a close? Honestly, I hoped that it wasn't, although my emotions were torn. I was kind've enjoying the experience and the trying-on of clothing. However, Megan and Sarah were still treating me as an object or an animal, to be looked at and observed. I didn't care for that.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, our mall trip was far from finished. I tried on all the other outfits, and since Megan told me she would pay for all of them so...well...I got all of them! Five skirts, three additional dresses, a couple pairs of heels, and some nice casual slip-ons had been added to my wardrobe, and I was giddy. To my relief, Megan didn't seem too peeved about the sizeable expenditure. If anything, she was pleased that I chose all of her hand-picked selections. I even let her get me the girly backpack she'd picked out, despite the fact that I already had a perfectly functional backpack at home. I guess that was fair, though, since she was paying for everything. If she wanted me to use the baby blue backpack, I'd oblige her.

After I armed with two bags full of new clothes, we spent well over an hour perusing the clothing shops. To my surprise, time flew by and the whole process wasn't the slightest bit tedious. I enjoyed helping Megan and Sarah pick out clothes that they'd like. I picked out cute tops and skirts, then I'd hand the clothes to them like a golden retriever fetching a stick. My eyebrows were always raised in curiosity as I did, and for some reason they found it hilarious.

By taking part in the process, I got to learn all kinds of things about them - from their favorite colors - Megan's was purple, which was news to me - to the fact that Sarah hated polyester. Apparently, Sarah didn't like the way it felt on her skin, and insisted that the material was more susceptible to carrying static charges.

When I suggested a skirt that Sarah happened to like, I felt validated, like I actually mattered. The act of suggesting clothing was easy for me, and it made me feel as if I was actually able to communicate with people again. I forgot how much I missed being able to express myself easily and clearly. Speech really was a beautiful thing...

"Okay, are we all ready then?" Megan asked as we walked out of one of the clothing stores. The place we'd just left was overtly goth, with mostly ripped, black clothing and shirts with weird crap on them. We hadn't bought anything there, but we did our fair share of window shopping. The grungy cashier had been sneaking glances at me, but I'd already grown accustomed to it. I didn't realize back when I was Joseph, but guys always thought they were less conspicuous than they actually were. At first, I started to count how many guys I caught staring at us, but I gave up on that endeavor after an hour or so.

By Megan's question, I assumed that meant we were heading home, but I was mistaken. Very mistaken. Instead, we came to a stop outside of a parlor for Tattoos and Piercings, as the sign indicated.

"So have you decided how many piercings you want to get?" Sarah asked. It took me a moment or two to realize that she was talking to me.

Raising an eyebrow, I lifted two fingers into the air, at which both girls giggled. Sarah had mentioned that I should get my ears pierced. That meant two piercings, right? There seemed to be some inside joke that I was missing, as if they were plotting behind my back...I didn't like that feeling.

Nervously, I followed them inside the shop and we approached the counter together. Behind it was a young woman with well over a dozen piercings hanging off her face. I gulped.

"Hi. My sister wants to get her earlobes pierced," Megan gestured toward me as she told the woman, a devious smile on her pretty face.

The woman looked at me and raised an eyebrow. "Is that right?" she asked, as if to make sure I was in consent.

I gave a quick nod. I'd have to get my earlobes pierced eventually, unless I wanted to be even weirder than I already was.

"She can't talk," Megan explained as I bit my lip. The woman's eyebrow returned to its normal position and she sent me a look of sympathy. I'd grown used to that reaction after people found out I couldn't talk. Sympathy. As if they thought I was incapable and permanently handicapped. I gritted my teeth in anger.

"Oh, she also wants an upper ear piercing, a nose piercing, and a belly piercing, too," Megan suggested with a devious glance at Sarah, causing my eyes to go wide. I definitely hadn't agreed to anything like that. I wasn't even certain that I'd be getting pierced at all today.

No, I crossed my arms beneath my breasts, shaking my head and glaring at Megan. She wasn't going to be bullying me around and making decisions for me. I wouldn't let her treat me like I was some sort of subhuman.

"She really wants all of those piercings," Megan reaffirmed, foraging through her purse and disregarding my protests entirely. "How much is that going to cost?"

"Megan..." Sarah began to interject on my behalf, glancing at me with concern as she read my emotions.

Before the lady behind the counter could answer, I stormed past Megan and I ran out the parlor door. I was furious, my anger stemming from Megan's treatment of me, the lady at the parlor's treatment of me, the stress from Jarvis' pending threats, and...well...everything. I just couldn't take it anymore, and my infamous temper resurfaced.

Holding the two shopping bags by my side, I gripped my hands so tightly that my longish nails began to cut into the skin of my palms. I considered running out of the



mall, just so that I wouldn't have to deal with Megan. However, a girl sprinting through a shopping mall would probably attract even more negative attention.

Instead, I found the nearest women's bathroom, which was thankfully unoccupied, and locked myself into one of the stalls. My arms trembling in anger, I put down my shopping bags and sat on the closed toilet lid. Clinging my knees to my chest, I rocked back and forth, tears beginning to stream down my cheek. Megan had paid for all of my stuff. Was I being a bitch for throwing such a hissy fit and running out of the parlor? Did I owe her something? If I was her, would I have ditched myself at detention, if it meant I could spend time with Clark? I honestly wasn't sure.

All I knew for sure was how I felt: like people were treating me as a non-human, and acting as if I wasn't capable of making decisions. That thought alone was enough to bring another wave of tears to my eyes. I mean...I was okay with being viewed as cute and whatnot, but I was a person. I was a real person with real needs. I wasn't a charity case...right?

"Hello?" Megan's voice called as the bathroom door creaked open. "Johanna? Are you in here?" Her voice had adopted the softest of tones, as if she was coaxing a baby bird from its nest. Did I want her to find me? No, I decided. I was still pissed at my sister. I stopped rocking back and forth, and sat as silently as a field mouse. Her footsteps grew ever closer, pausing in front of my stall, which happened to be the only one with a closed door. Crap. I hadn't thought of that. I'd also left my two bags on the floor, and Megan probably spotted them already. I suppose I wasn't the hardest person to track.

"Look, I know you're in there," Megan sighed, her voice weary and jaded. "I just want to talk."

She didn't pound on the door, or even knock. Instead, she stood on the opposite side of my door and did not move. I could see the tips of the winter boots she was wearing, poking out from beneath the stall door.

"I'm not leaving, by the way," her voice cracked with hints of emotion. "Not until you come out of there and talk to me." She took a deep breath and exhaled, "I just want to work this out. I thought that you were over this sort of stuff. The whole 'exploding for no reason, then storming off and refusing to talk about it' phase. You let these things fester, and then...why don't you...why don't you tell me about your problems? Tell me what's going on. Just once. Once! That's all I'm asking."

With an audible gulp, she continued, "I guess I'll start it off, though. I don't really know what you're angry about specifically. If you're mad about the piercings, then I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd react like that, and it was stupid of me. Okay? There's my apology. I'm sorry. You know..." her voice grew even more shaky. "You know how

much I care about you, and how much I love you. You're such a precious little thing, I would never want to be cruel to you."

A precious little thing. Was that what I was? A thing? Not even human?

Without warning, I hopped off the toilet lid and popped open the stall door.

"Thank God," she said with a sigh of relief. Megan's elated expression soon turned to worry when she saw my glaring eyes.

"Okay, okay." Megan put up her hands in the universal sign for surrender. "What did I do wrong? Please tell me. You've got to stop internalizing this stuff."

Looking around for something to write on, I threw my hands into the air in frustration and pulled out my phone. Although I was standing directly in front of Megan, I'd have to text her my thoughts. As soon as I started to hit the touchscreen keyboard, tears resurfaced on my face. My fingers working rapidly, I funneled all of my emotion into the text.

Stop treating me like I'm a fucking toy, I wrote, as a tear trickled down my cheek. I'm a real person with real feelings. I'm not some barbie doll that you can dress up and giggle about. The words spilled out of my fingers like a river, and I could do little to stop them. And you were forcing me to get piercings because you wanted to manipulate me, and you didn't pick me up after detention because you don't care about me, and I could have died. Would anyone have even cared if I died? Would you?

"Oh my God," Megan whispered as she read my text. "You kept all of that all of you the whole week? Why do you do that to yourself? Why didn't you...why didn't you tell me?" She shook her head, and put a hand on my shoulder. Seeing me recoil ever-so-slightly, she withdrew her hand and chose a different approach.

"Look, I think you're really cute, and everything you do is really funny and quirky, but I don't think you're a toy. You're my little sister. My smart, charming, funny little sister. I know you're a 'real person', and I'm sorry if you thought I was treating you like a 'toy'. I'll never treat you like a toy. Ever." She stared down at me, and I held her gaze unflinchingly, ignoring the tears on my cheek. "I promise."

"I'm sorry about making you get piercings...I didn't really think that I was 'forcing' you, but I guess I see how you could view it that way. If you felt like I was rushing you into something that you didn't want to do, then I'm sorry about that, too. I won't ever do that again."

Testing the waters, she once again carefully rested a hand on my shoulder. This time, I allowed it.

"But this is really about me not picking you up after school, isn't it? It's about what happened when you walked home alone."

I didn't nod, but a nod wasn't required. Megan knew that she was right. As soon as she mentioned that night, more tears stung my eyes.

"I wish I could have been there to pick you up, but how could I have known? You know how much I love you...I'd never want you to get hurt," her voice cracked once more. "And I'm sorry that I wasn't there for you."

Slowly, she worked her arm around my back and embraced me in a hug as my tears began to dry. Damn, she was sneaky.

"Mom and Dad didn't really tell me what happened that night...what happened, Johanna?"

Looking up at her, I shrugged. Karma, I guess, I wrote in my phone.

"Huh?"

I shrugged again, and her eyes grew intense like a lioness.

"Who?" The question was pointed, sharp enough to draw blood. "Who did it to you?"

I didn't answer her question, and instead wrapped my arms around her and reciprocated her hug.

"You aren't going to tell me?" She asked.

I shook my head in reply. I couldn't tell her, it would only cause more trouble. God forbid she did something to hurt Jarvis...he'd probably kill me in retribution.

"Okay, well...just promise you'll tell me eventually. I don't want to see you get hurt again, okay? When you're ready to tell me, I'm all ears...about anything, any time. Doesn't it feel better to get all of that off your chest?"

I nodded, and managed a weak grin. After I stormed out of the parlor, I was dreading a conversation like this, but it actually had made me feel a lot better. In the past, I'd just give her the cold shoulder after she pissed me off, and we'd end up sulking around each other in disdain. This was a much nicer solution. I felt...elated.

Breaking off the hug, I fished out my phone and typed, Sorry for making a scene. With the message, I offered another faint smile.

"Don't worry about it," Megan matched my faint smile, and wrapped me in another hug. "Now let's fix your makeup. It's an absolute mess."

\* \* \*

After Megan had lured me out of the bathroom, I decided to go back to the piercing shop after all. I wouldn't get a belly button piercing, upper ear piercing or the nose piercing, because those were way too excessive, but I agreed to get my earlobes pierced.

That's what I'd originally signed up for and, to be honest, I was curious to see how I'd look with jewelry dangling from my ears. Sarah also helped to convince me to get my ears pierced, by explaining that I could always let the holes themselves close if I wasn't happy with the results.

I followed the pierced woman as she led me to a comfortable black recliner. If the woman found it weird that I didn't have my ears pierced yet as a fifteen year old, she didn't let me know. In fact, she didn't talk much at all as she settled me into the comfy leather recliner and pierced my ears. She probably figured it would be awkward to speak to me when I couldn't hold up my end of a conversation. Either that, or she thought I was deaf. I couldn't really blame her for making that assumption.

The entire piercing process was surprisingly quick and easy. Just a couple light pricks of the skin, which I barely felt due to the local anaesthetic. Two shiny studs were put in place on my earlobes without incident while she made the initial piercings. Quick and easy, just as promised. She then explained how I'd have to leave them in if I didn't want the holes to close up.

As she walked me out toward the gleeful faces of Sarah and Megan, the woman gave me some tips on how to know if a piercing got infected, and how to prevent infections from manifesting. Frustratingly, she repeated this same advice to Megan at the checkout counter, as if I couldn't be expected to follow directions or take care of myself since I was 'disabled' in some way.

I clenched my jaw in anger as we left the parlor, but ultimately forced myself to calm down. The piercing woman had made some assumptions about me, but I couldn't dwell on that. If I did, I'd let my anger fester until it boiled over. I couldn't be that person anymore. I had to accept what I couldn't change, and be open about my serious problems. I had to try to be positive.

'Happy thoughts, Johanna,' I ordered myself silently. 'Happy thoughts.' Nobody liked a Debbie Downer. With that, I exited the mall with pierced ears and an elated grin on my face.

# CHAPTER 14

## *Hearts and Minds*

“Are you sure you have everything you need?” Megan asked me as we rolled to a stop outside of Caroline’s house. Like ours, it was a quaint suburban dwelling, with a picturesque snow-laden front lawn and pasty-white fencing. Two small gnome statues popped their heads above the fluffy sheet of white snow, smiles fixed on their faces.

I sent Megan a stinkface that screamed You aren’t my Mom. As soon as she saw my glare, Megan erupted in laughter. Apparently, I looked ‘cute’ when I was angry. However, in this case, I wasn’t actually mad...just pretending. Megan often felt the need to coddle me, but I didn’t mind too much. At least we weren’t fighting anymore. Our brief spat and subsequent heart-to-heart had brought our relationship to a deeper level.

As far as the sleepover was concerned, I was beyond prepared. I had my sleeping bag, makeup kit and nail polish (because Megan insisted that I bring both of those), pajamas, clothes for tomorrow, toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, hairbrush, phone, whiteboard, snacks, water bottle, and even my own soap. Okay, maybe I went a bit overboard with preparation. It was my first sleepover, and Caroline was both my new friend and Clark’s sister. Needless to say, I wanted to make a good impression. I even chose to wear some of my new clothes: leggings, a skirt, and a light blue top.

Holding my duffle bag full of supplies, I waved goodbye to my sister and knocked on the front door of Caroline’s house. I half-hoped that Clark would greet me at the door, although Caroline had texted to inform me that he was stuck watching film of last night’s game. Instead, Mrs. Nordquist, Caroline and Clark’s mother, answered the door.

“Hello there, you must be Johanna.” She gave me a warming smile. Like her children, she was blonde with light green eyes and a brilliant set of teeth. Geez, all of them just looked so perfect. I could only imagine their family Christmas card photos. I assumed that Mrs. Nordquist was at least 40, but she looked far younger than that. Her skin was soft and youthful, and she wasn’t even wearing that much makeup. Damn...what would I look like at 40? The thought bothered me more than it should have, considering 25 years would pass before I learned the answer.

I nodded with a polite smile and headed inside, inspecting her makeup once more as I walked by her. Okay, she was definitely wearing makeup, but she had the perfect balance of blush. How did she manage that? Part of me was tempted to ask her for makeup tips.

“So you’re the one Clark won’t stop talking about,” Mrs. Nordquist’s grin widened, and my cheeks flushed. “I can’t say I blame him, you’re very pretty.” My cheeks only grew redder. She seemed to sense my discomfort, because after that she dropped into a soothing, motherly tone: “Caroline and Olivia are upstairs doing God knows what. If there’s anything you need, just let me know.”

Something about the sound of her voice put me at ease, and I returned her grin with a cordial nod. Hauling my duffle bag up the stairs wasn’t easy, and I probably should have asked for help. I just wasn’t quite strong enough to carry that kind of stuff anymore. However, I viewed the task as more of a personal challenge, and refused to ask for assistance. Slinging the bag over my back, I clenched my teeth and journeyed up the stairs.

Arriving at Caroline’s room, both she and Olivia were already giggling on her bed and painting each other’s nails as the first Captain America movie played on the TV. Her room unmistakably belonged to a teenaged girl, with a floral band of wallpaper, a pink bed, and Chris Evans posters all over the walls.

I was greeted by a gasp. “Did you get your ears pierced?!” Caroline screeched, almost dropping her vial of silver nail polish.

I nodded with a wry smile, showing them the studs in my earlobes. It kind've felt like my ear had been stapled at the bottom. I found myself enjoying the sensation.

“The first rite of passage,” Olivia said in a half-joking manner. She stood up and took a step closer to inspect the simple stud on my right ear. “It looks good, though. There’s barely any swelling at all.”

Thanks, I mouthed, withdrawing my own vials of polish from my bag and joining Caroline on her bed.

Since Olivia's polish had just finished, I ended up painting delicate designs on Caroline's fingernails while Olivia gave mine a nice coat of sparkling light blue. The two of them gossipped while we painted. They talked about movies, shows, things they'd seen on Pinterest, and boys. From what I'd gathered, Olivia really wanted to set Caroline up with Andrew - one of Brandon's friends on the football team. Apparently she'd been working on arranging a date between the two for some time, because Caroline seemed like she was sick of hearing about him. He hadn't asked her out yet, so Caroline assumed that he wasn't interested.

I longed to join the conversation but, of course, that wasn't possible. To their credit, both of them tried to make me feel more included by asking me yes/no questions every now and then, which I could respond to with a nod or a shake of the head. They weren't much, but those tiny gestures made me feel much more included.

As our polish dried, Olivia pulled out her phone and prodded me on the shoulder. "I found this app I think you'll like. Look." I peered over her shoulder as she typed something into her phone. Testing, testing. 1, 2, 3. The words came through her phone in an English woman's voice. Disregarding the accent, it sounded pretty natural. It wasn't exactly the same as speaking, but it was something.

A minute or two later, I had the app on my phone and started playing around with it. Unfortunately, it only had one voice style setting, but that was okay. At least it wasn't a man's voice.

Throughout the night, as we played Truth or Dare, ate ice cream, and marathoned Chris Evans movies, I occasionally used the app to communicate. Although it was somewhat fun, it was also extremely gimmicky. I still couldn't contribute to conversations organically. There were crucial elements and quirks to regular human conversation that go far beyond the exchange of words. People interrupted each other all the time, and bounced between ideas quickly. Tone of voice and the slightest bit of stress on certain words could change the meaning of sentences. Those were some of the many subtleties that I'd never be able to recapture, no matter how many apps I used.

Another reason I didn't like the app was that it forced me to look down at my phone and type in the middle of conversations, when I'd rather be making eye contact or analyzing facial expressions. Although she had good intentions, Olivia suggesting the app only made me more acutely aware of frustrating shortcoming.

"So," Olivia asked, as we lay side-by-side. "What do you think you'd sound like, if you could talk? Do you think you'd sound more like me, or more like Care?" 'Care' was

evidently her nickname for Caroline. I wasn't entirely sold on it, although I suppose the word 'Care' itself was rather fitting.

"Liv..." Caroline whispered with hesitation in her voice, worried that I would be offended.

However, I waved those concerns aside with my hand. I didn't want to be seen as thin-skinned, and the truth was that I was already coming to accept my limitations. It was just part of my life...my identity.

Regarding Olivia's question, her voice was far more sensual than Caroline's, dripping with the syrupy sound of a girl who has all the confidence in the world. Caroline's voice, on the other hand, was probably more similar to my own - based on the two or three seconds where I was able to speak as Johanna. Her voice was a timid high-alto that bordered on the edge of soprano, the kind that was light and sweet enough to tame wolves.

Without much second thought, I pointed toward Caroline, causing her to squeal with joy. It was a silly reason to get excited, but...well...I guess that summed up my first sleepover: silly and fun. I used to think that sleepovers would be daunting, but I was beyond incorrect.

I never actually ended up using my sleeping bag, as the three of us all drifted into slumber side-by-side on Caroline's bed during the third Chris Evans movie - some stupid romantic comedy.

\* \* \*

"Sleeeeeeepyheaaad." Someone rustled my shoulder and an index finger poked my cheek. "Waaake uuuup...it's almost noooon."

My eyes slowly batted open, and I struggled to sit upright on Caroline's bed. I rubbed my slightly tangled hair and let out a silent yawn. Noon? Shit, Clark and I still had to prepare for our trial, and I had family dinner...

"Just kidding!" Caroline giggled beside me. "My Mom made us breakfast and it was starting to get cold. Sorry for lying."

Sure enough, the clock by her bedside read '10:00 AM.' It wasn't super early, but I definitely could've slept for another hour or so. I'd had a big week, after all. A big, wild, exciting, week.

After I'd brushed my hair and teeth, I made my way downstairs. It seemed like everyone in the house had beaten me to the punch, though, as they were already eating in the dining room. Mrs. Nordquist, Mr. Nordquist, Clark, Caroline, and Olivia



were all dressed for the day and ready to go. Meanwhile, I was still clad in my pink t-shirt and baby blue pajamas with miniature puppies scattered across the soft exterior, and I couldn't help but feel out of place. Luckily, they hadn't decided to wait for me before digging into their meals...that would've been so much worse.

Blushing, I grabbed a plate and helped myself to some of the eggs, bacon, and hashbrowns. Nobody made any comments about my attire, thank God. It was breakfast, after all...what kind of people put on real clothes for breakfast on a Sunday morning? Were they always this formal? Crap, what if his parents thought that I was some sort of slouch?

Taking a seat at the large wooden dining table, I soon discovered that the food was excellent. I'd have to ask Clark's Mom for tips on cooking her hashbrowns, because they came out perfectly.

Because I arrived last, I was the last person to finish eating. About half-way through my meal, Caroline and Olivia ditched me, running upstairs to do each other's hair. That left me alone with Clark, his parents, and my delicious breakfast.

As I ate, I felt all of their eyes drilling into my soul. Clark kept looking at me with a handsome smile from across the table. His smile was infectious, and I did my best to contain myself from giggling.

I didn't want to come off like a barbarian in front of his parents, so I carefully cut up all of my food and consumed it in only the tiniest of bites. I knew what Clark was thinking the whole time: 'you're so cute when you eat.' Fortunately, he never voiced that thought. I would've died from embarrassment if he had.

When I finished eating, I pulled out a pen and paper, scrawling a note to Mrs. Nordquist thanking her for both breakfast and her hospitality. My handwriting improved dramatically over the course of the week, and it was starting to look like a legitimate font. When I passed her the note, a smile flashed across her lips and I knew I was winning her over. Hearts and minds. I had to win hearts and minds if I wanted to get their stamp of approval.

"So, Johanna." Clark's father began with a friendly tone. He was an intimidating, mustached man who towered over me. With hazel eyes, dirty blonde hair, and a more rugged overall look, it appeared as his kids took after their mother. He wore a nice button-down underneath an unbuttoned jacket, as if he was about to open the door and stroll out into the frosty morning air. "Tell us about yourself."

After a moment of awkward silence, Mr. Nordquist caught his mistake, and tried a different approach. "You're from Saint Paul?"

I nodded eagerly. I wasn't comfortable enough with that app to use it in a situation like this, so it was just going to be a Yes/No conversation.

"And you're a sophomore at Cheran?"

I nodded once more. The great Cheran High School. Back when I was in 8th grade, I had the choice of either attending Cheran or an all-boys private school. Thank God I'd chosen Cheran...I could scarcely imagine being the only girl in a school full of boys. They probably would have made me switch schools, and I'd be dealing with yet another major change in my life.

"Are you on any teams? Any extracurriculars?" He scratched at his blond beard as he questioned me. It was a well-kept beard, and I imagine he probably trimmed it daily. Would Clark get a beard eventually? What would his face feel like, if he did? Would it still be fun to kiss him?

This time I shook my head to Mr. Nordquist's question. No. I'd never gotten involved in anything like that. I hadn't found any extracurriculars that I enjoyed, and I hadn't played sports before. I paused after giving my answer.

This was definitely part of a test and I was failing it. I was already disabled, so I had that going against me. Why would his parents want him to be dating a disabled girl? My lack of extracurriculars probably affirmed their assumptions: that I would never be able to go to college or find a job, and that Clark would have to take care of me for the rest of his life if we stayed together. Were they wrong, though?

Shit...if Clark's parents didn't approve of our relationship, I was screwed. My heart started to race. What if I made something up? What if I told them I was an ice skater or a mathlete? There was no point. They'd find out eventually that I was just a worthless recluse. I couldn't lie to them.

"Hobbies?" he continued, still trying to sound as pleasant as possible - despite the fact that he was grilling me. Unless you counted video games or - more recently - sign language and calligraphy, I probably didn't even have anything the Nordquists would consider a 'hobby'.

Desperate, I pulled out a piece of paper and wrote I can write things nicely as fancily as I could, then turned it to show him. I felt like a dog, desperately cycling through all of the lackluster tricks I could perform.

Mr Nordquist still looked decidedly unimpressed, so I showed off some of my sign language skills, too. Thankfully, that captured his interest, but not in a good way. As he shared a knowing side-glance with his wife, I knew what he was thinking: 'See? She's basically deaf'. I was so uncomfortable and frustrated, I wanted to die.

Like an angel descended from heaven, Clark put an end to the most grueling two minutes of my life: "Johanna and I need to prep for the mock trial tomorrow. We should get working," he said as he stood and headed toward his room.

I hesitated to follow him, instead deciding to take my dishes to the kitchen sink and wash them. 'Fuck it,' I thought as I started to wash all over the other breakfast dishes. I'd do whatever it took to convince his parents that I wasn't a giant mistake. I worked on the dishes fervently, fueled by my frustrated and re-surfaced self-loathing. Rubbing the plates with fury, I left them sparkling before Mrs. Nordquist even had a chance to stop me. I dashed by her as she entered the kitchen, leaving her with a puzzled expression.

I scampered into Clark's room and shut the door behind me, immediately sinking to the ground and hugging my knees to my chest. My lower jaw trembled and tears started involuntarily streaming down my cheek and dripping off of my chin.

"Hey you," Clark sat on his bed with a smile, which quickly faded. "What's wrong? Why are you crying?" He walked over and sat down on the floor beside me. He ran a strong hand through my hair, before draping it over my shoulder and pressing me securely into the crook of his arm.

Instead of answering with a note, I leaned my head onto his shoulder, resting it there and letting my tears soak into his shirt.

"You think he hates you, don't you?" Clark asked as he wiped my tears away with his free hand.

I nodded and let loose another stream of tears. I was worthless. I was mute. I wasn't particularly good at anything. I wasn't even emotionally stable enough to get through the day without bawling my eyes out. I was a burden. The only way my conversation with Mr. Nordquist could have gone worse is if he had asked me about the fact that I used to be a guy. Maybe his father was right to think that Clark could do better...he certainly could. Anyone on the cheerleading squad would be more worthy of a relationship with him. He was way out of my league.

"He doesn't hate you, Johanna." Clark sighed. "That's just how he is. He's a stickler." He paused, as if he was desperately trying to come up with something positive to say. "I think my Mom likes you. Her opinion is really the only one that matters."

I looked up at him, my face only inches from his. I didn't even need to mouth anything. Clark knew exactly what I was thinking.

"Really," he replied, definitively.

Abruptly, I moved in and pressed my lips against his in a moment of spontaneous bliss. He was surprised, but followed my lead quickly and soon we were making out on

his floor. He laid down on the gray carpet and let me crawl on top of him. He bared my full weight with no complaints as my tongue danced with his. With a faint smile, I ended our kiss, pulling my mouth away from his and resting my body on his chest, my arms wrapped around the back of his head.

I'd never taken charge like that before, but it was actually quite thrilling. Clark didn't seem to mind it, either. The whole exchange made me forget all of my worries about gaining approval from his parents. He knew them better than I did, and if he told me that there was nothing to worry about, then there was nothing to worry about. He wouldn't lie to me about something like that. I remembered what I had promised myself: I would trust him.

I would trust him, but that didn't mean I had to be submissive. Pulling out my phone and turning to the Notes section, I began typing a short reminder to myself: Be more assertive. Ever since I became Johanna, my lack of voice had accompanied a lack of choice. I'd shed some of my bad habits of interrupting people, making bad assumptions, and being rude, but I'd also lost some of my social assertiveness. Whether it was my relationship with Clark or my dealings with Jarvis, I had to stand my ground more often, and make decisions before they were made for me.

In truth, the inspiration for my note came from Dad's story about Mom, and how she became more self-confident via the use of her journal. This was my own version of that, on the screen of my phone...the 21st century journal.

"So, the trial," Clark said with a forced cough and a wry grin. Right...that was why we were alone in his room. With that, we began strategizing. Like we did at the school library, Clark talked while I listened and drew up a game-plan. "Tomorrow, we have the opening statements and then four witnesses - two for us, two for them. We won't have much time to cross-examine them, so we'll have to be prepared. One of their witnesses is going to be playing an Eastern European villager whose family was killed by Genghis Khan..."

# CHAPTER 15

## *Forks and Spoons*

I'd been enjoying my time with Clark but, as I learned from my late grandfather, all good things eventually come to an end. Clark and I spent the lion's share of our morning preparing for the trial, sitting side-by-side on the comfortable carpet of his bedroom floor. We were studious and prepared a series of softball questions for our own witnesses, along with some harsh cross-examination queries for the opposition's. Although we were remarkably productive, we did take a few breaks to enjoy the finer things in life. Namely, each other's' lips.

Once or twice, I caught a glimpse of Clark's mother or father peering into the room, their heads popping into the half-open doorframe like prairie dogs. They were careful to make sure that we weren't up to any funny business, and I guess I couldn't blame them. Their teenaged son was dating a girl who they didn't fully approve, and they wanted to take precautionary measures. The danger of being caught added to the excited passion of our kisses, and I couldn't help but giggle with delight every time our lips touched. Fortunately, my giggles were silent and his parents never caught us kissing.

Dad's arrival to pick me up from the Nordquists' house could best be described as bittersweet. Although I was looking forward to the long-promised afternoon with my father, I also wanted to spend a bit more time with Caroline and Olivia. After all, our sleepover was the original reason for my presence at the Nordquists' house. I doubt the pair minded that I'd spent a couple hours in Clark's room, though. They found ways to keep themselves busy without me. Both of my new friends were giddy when they ran down the stairs to wish me a brief farewell. Caroline was especially thrilled to show off

the intricate braiding technique that she'd learned from Olivia in my absence, and I couldn't help but imagine what my hair would look like with similar braids.

Both of the girls' farewell hugs took a silly amount of time, considering that we would be seeing each other for school on Monday anyway. Clark's farewell hug, on the other hand, was cordial and quick. His parents were watching the entire exchange, and he was hesitant to display affection toward me in their presence. Even though he had insisted that his mother liked me, I wasn't entirely convinced.

After I hopped into Dad's SUV and started humming a silent tune to myself, Dad hit me with some annoying news. Because it had been scheduled last week, Dad had to take me to my doctor's appointment before our hot chocolate trip.

I'd never really enjoyed spending time at doctor's offices. They always smelled a bit funny, and I never knew what to do with my feet when doctors instructed me to sit on the padded bench. Was I supposed to dangle them off the edge?

A quick drive later, Dad herded me into a doctor's office with one of those long aquarium-tanks built into its wall. This was a new doctor's office, not the same place I usually went. In the car, Dad told me that I would be seeing a female doctor. For some reason, that knowledge made me feel a little more at ease. We didn't wait long before my name was called by a chipper receptionist, and Dad gave me a 'good luck' kiss on the forehead.

\* \* \*

"Okay, open wide." Doctor Johnson requested, shining a light down my throat, a look of awe on her face. She was an older woman, who looked to be somewhere in her mid-sixties with long, white hair pulled back into a ponytail. In defiance of her years, she had immaculate skin and her eyes were sharp and intelligent behind her thick-framed glasses. She carried herself with a shade of self-comfort that I found admirable, and I could only hope to possess some day.

"Incredible. I've never seen anything like this. You have all the necessary body-parts to produce sound, but it's almost as if there's an invisible mechanism muting you."

Reclining on the padded cot in Doctor Johnson's patient room with my raven hair splayed out around me, my heart raced with anxiety. If there was an opportunity to somehow reverse this curse medically, I'd find out fairly soon. It was a long shot, but...who knows?

"Okay, can you give me a cough?" She requested pleasantly.

I forced a cough, as she pressed a gentle hand against my lower abdomen and another near my throat. Unfortunately, only the slightest of sounds came out. I wasn't particularly surprised, as I'd noticed that none of my previous coughs had produced much noise.

"Incredible," she repeated. "Try to yell something."

She shined the pocket light down my throat once more, as I yelled I hate Jarvis Duncan!

Of course, no sound came out at all.

"Well, I suppose this is a great lesson: don't mess around with wishing stones."

Doctor Johnson smiled genuinely, fully under the belief that I had brought this wish upon myself through my own incompetence. Most people seemed to believe that these days, and I didn't even bother correcting them. I couldn't tell them that Jarvis did this to me, because apparently he was untouchable. I was stuck with all the blame. I seethed with frustration below my forced smile. At least the doctor treated me like a human.

"I don't know what to tell you." She shrugged her shoulders after another 30 minutes of close observation and testing. She'd had me do everything from sighing to humming to whistling, but nothing seemed to work. "Your problem breaks every rule I've ever known. I'm usually the last person to suggest that the only solution to a problem is mystical, but I think that may be the case here."

My heart sank as she uttered the words. I wasn't sure what I expected from this visit to the doctor's, but I was disappointed nevertheless. It seemed that wishing stones were far too powerful for their own good. As expected, there didn't appear to be a medical cure to my disability. I was stuck. Trapped.

Throughout the rest of my session with Doctor Johnson, she confirmed that I was 100% girl, capable of getting pregnant and having...periods. I hadn't had one yet, but she said I could expect one within the next few weeks. I shuddered at the thought. After that rough conversation, I got my first official measurements. As it turned out, my initial guesses had been pretty accurate: 5'6, 103 lbs. One thing was certain: I wouldn't be winning any weight-lifting competitions any time soon.

When my check-up was complete and I returned to the lobby, Dad knew the results long before Doctor Johnson informed him. The fact that I would never speak again was written in my jaded frown. I wasn't pleased to hear the verdict, but I always knew that a medical solution was a long-shot. I hadn't been holding onto too much hope, but Doctor Johnson's diagnosis had scattered those few shreds of possibility into the wind.

Light snow swirled outside the frosty windowpane, and I gripped my mug of hot chocolate tightly. Although the quaint coffee shop was well-heated, my hands were still a bit frigid after the short walk across the parking lot.

“You’re in a good mood all of the sudden,” Dad noted matter-of-factly as he sipped on his own cup of cocoa. Unbeknownst to Dad, his sip had left a tiny chocolate mustache on his upper lip, which caused me to let out a giggle.

If I wasn’t mute, my shrill laugh and snorts would have been embarrassing, considering our public setting. Fortunately, I didn’t have to worry about making a fool of myself, as all of my giggling was silent. Yet another silver lining, I thought as I began to collect myself and wiped the joyous tears from my eyes.

“What?” Dad asked. Although he was confused by my laughter, the corners of his lips gave the hint of a smile. He was just glad that I was happy. “Did I say something funny?”

I shook my head, still grinning. Part of my laughter was due to his undetected chocolate mustache, but not all of it.

For some reason, Doctor Johnson’s analysis had brought me a sense of relief. It was difficult to explain, but her verdict created a sense of stability, which had been missing from my life for the entire previous week. I was Johanna and I couldn’t talk. That was my identity, and it wasn’t changing any time soon. Doctor Johnson’s words had forced me to accept that fact. Her assessment forced me to discard all hope for regaining my voice. The war was over, and I’d lost. That knowledge brought me a weird sense of serenity, as if a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

I’d love to explain that dichotomy to Dad, but I certainly couldn’t mouth the words and it was a difficult notion to share via pen and paper. Instead, I maintained my smile and took a sip of my hot chocolate. I licked my lips after taking my sip, careful to avoid giving myself a chocolate mustache. As ridiculous as a little chocolate mustache looked on Dad, it would look infinitely sillier on me.

With that in mind, I lowered my mouth into the scarf, which was wrapped tightly around my neck. Like a bird cleaning its feathers, I shook my head, brushing my lips against the fabric of my scarf as I did. I suppose I could have used a napkin to clean the possible chocolate mustache from my face, but that wasn’t my style. The scarf seemed much more convenient.

My procedure was interrupted by Dad’s hearty laughter. Unlike mine, his laugh boomed, drawing the eyes of half the coffee shop’s customers.



“What are you doing? Are you a penguin?” His full smile crinkled the corners of his eyes, presenting his faint middle-aged wrinkles for the world to see. He didn’t seem to care, though. ‘Let them stare’, his attitude seemed to declare. Meanwhile, my cheeks were blushing scarlet, uncomfortable with the attention pointed in our direction.

For the first time in my life, I took a moment to realize how much I admired my father. Although he sometimes lacked emotional intelligence, he had wonderful intentions and he was relentlessly bold. Back when I was Joseph, I grew bitter from the way he treated me. Along with Mom, he always got on my case about how I needed to socialize more, and how I should spend more time with the family. Every now and again, they’d ground me for bullshit reasons and take away my computer, and it would drive me crazy with rage. At the time, I’d hated him.

Looking back on it, though, I could no longer blame him. Video games themselves weren’t terrible things, and I did have online friends, but my parents were right. I was either at school or I was playing video games. Every other activity was tertiary. I was a hermit, and I hadn’t spent enough time with them. Hell, sometimes I felt like they hardly knew me. How could I blame Dad for pressuring me into stepping outside my comfort zone and spending time with the family? How could I blame him for scolding me, back in the Junior High, when I’d gone through my ‘lashing-out’ phase?

“Okay, okay,” Dad interrupted my thoughts with an excited voice. “Do you want to play Twenty Questions?”

I nodded eagerly. Grandpa - my mother's father - and I used to play Twenty Questions while we were ice fishing together. It’d been his favorite game, and he was phenomenal at it. At first, he defeated me almost every time we played. Lack of success didn’t stop me, though. As I got older, I began beating him more and more often, until our guessing skills were almost equally matched. Of course, Dad knew the game fairly well, having lost more than a few rounds to Grandpa when proving his worthiness to date my mother, and he knew that the game held a special place in my heart.

I wasn’t sure if the rules that Grandpa played with were the ‘official rules’, but it wouldn’t surprise me if they weren’t. He wasn’t the kind of man who played by other people’s rules. With Twenty Questions in the Larsen family, the rules were simple: one person picked something. Anything in the world: a person, place, or thing. The other person had twenty guesses, which had to be asked in the form of ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions. Apparently, the game had been popular in the early 20th century, but Grandpa had been eager to make sure that it never died out.

“Err...you can pick,” Dad suggested with a wince, bringing painful attention to the fact that I would be far better at answering questions than asking them.

Got it, I mouthed with a nod, signalling the start of our game.

“Alright, is it bigger than a shoebox?” Dad began his line of questioning.

With a devious grin, I shook my head. Nineteen questions remaining, and there was absolutely no chance that Dad would guess the correct answer. After all, who in their right mind would suspect that - out of all the peoples, places, and things in the world - I'd chosen a fork. Innocuous and mundane, I found that picking utensils was almost a guaranteed victory. Nobody ever suspected that I'd choose a humble fork, out of anything on Earth.

\* \* \*

“I laid out an outfit on your bed. You'd better get changed, or Mom's gonna flip. You've got like...” Megan glanced at her phone. “Less than ten minutes to get all ready.”

I sent Megan a frustrated look as I scampered up the stairs to my room. Between the visit to the doctor's office and my hot chocolate outing with Dad, I hadn't left much time to prepare for my least favorite Sunday tradition.

Family dinner awaited me, and a growing sense of dread accompanied it. I didn't know what to expect from my extended family, especially considering some of them hated me with a passion. Uncle Steve, in particular, would go out of his way to poke fun at me and drive me toward misery. On top of that, I'd have to deal with a whole new set of parameters and restrictions from my socially archaic family. Undoubtedly, I'd be forced to do some cooking, and I wouldn't be able to lounge around like I had as Joseph.

After a bitter sigh, I slipped on the black leggings and the recently purchased skirt laying on my bed, then pulled the frilly white blouse over my head. It was fairly warm outside - just shy of ten degrees Fahrenheit - and we were going to be inside most of the time, so I wasn't too concerned about wearing a skirt. With practiced ease, I put on my heeled boots, slung a plaid scarf around my neck, and threw on one of my lighter coats. I'd grown used to dressing like this, and didn't find it at all embarrassing anymore. After trying on dozens of outfits on my shopping trip with Megan and Sarah, I'd faced almost every fear I had about my body and appearance. I suppose that I was in a state of acceptance when it came to my existence of Johanna. Acceptance of what I could change, and what I couldn't.

Striding to the bathroom mirror, I touched up my makeup and added some of the world's subtlest lipstick. ‘Looking good,’ I silently whispered to myself with a proud grin, before blowing a kiss to the mirror.

I scurried down the stairs and joined my Mom, Dad, and sister in the car. As per usual, I was making us late for Sunday dinner. This time, however, Mom and Megan weren't disdainful, instead choosing to compliment my appearance. They even shared a knowing smile with each other after seeing me, as if they were congratulating each other on my progress. I suppose this is what they both wanted, after all: a second daughter and a little sister, respectively.

Dad, on the other hand, was oblivious to that entire dynamic. He'd grown used to my tardiness, and he didn't think anything of it. Instead, he chose to break the car's silence with a series of trademark Dad jokes.

"I have a fear of speedbumps." He remarked out of the blue. At this point, Megan and I knew exactly where this was heading...although Mom always fell into his silly traps.

"Why is that, honey?" She asked with mild concern and a hint of confusion.

"Oh don't worry. I'm slowly getting over it."

He and Megan burst out laughing, while I buried my face in my hands, hiding a shameful smile underneath. Mom just rolled her eyes and shook her head, turning to stare out the window as she failed to suppress a grin. As much as we pretended to hate his dumb jokes, they never failed to amuse us.

Our arrival at dinner was marked by the usual series of rituals. First, the two exuberant corgis came to the door as it swung open and greeted us with their inaudible barks. I used to laugh at them when they tried barking pathetically with their non-existent voice boxes, but I wasn't laughing this time. Making eye contact with one of the dogs, it stared at me as if it recognized me, wiggling its tiny nub of a tail. We shared a brief moment of solidarity, before Grandma's nasty-sounding cough caught my attention.

"Welcome, welcome!" A warm smile spread across Grandma's face as she fought through her cough and ushering us inside. Of course, she was wearing her signature red sweater, straight out of an 'ugly sweater' catalogue. "Oh, look, the dogs are so happy to see you!"

One by one, she gave each of my family-members kisses on their cheeks. The process came to a screeching halt when it was my turn to step forward. She adjusted her glasses as she studied my face. "Megan?" She asked in puzzlement, before turning around and confirming that she'd just greeted my sister. I guess I couldn't blame her. Megan and I looked similar with our long black hair and blue eyes, although she was both older and taller. "You're not Megan," she let out yet another concerning cough. "Who may you be, young lady?"

“That’s Johanna. She’s my new sister.” Megan answered for me with a reassuring grin. “She doesn’t talk.”

“Is that right?” Grandma’s face lit up with joy. “Another granddaughter? Wonderful!”

To my surprise, she pulled me in and gave me a kiss of the cheek. Did she not care that I wasn’t Joseph anymore? Did she fail to realize that I was the same person as Joseph had been? Either way, she didn’t even seem to care. She simply accepted that I was Johanna...her new granddaughter who didn’t talk. It almost made me cry, on the spot.

“I’ve got the best present for you, sweetie.” Grandma squeezed my hand, her face alive with radiant youth. “You’ll absolutely adore it. Absolutely...absolutely...” her words trailed into murmurs, and she left my side, wandering off into the kitchen as if she’d never spoken to me at all.

I took a nervous gulp as I watched her go. Grandma always had a bit of a crazy streak, but it seemed like she had taken one more step away from lucidity. Even so, I loved her.

Following my parents and Megan into the family room, we performed the same greeting with the rest of the family. Normally, the women would greet me with a hug while I would shake hands with the men. That was no longer the case. Instead, both sexes of the family greeted me with uneasy hugs. I was accustomed to being the taller party during most hugs, but that was also no longer so. We were a tall family, and - aside from my grandmother - I was likely the shortest person in attendance. As a result, I found my head buried into people’s chests with almost every hug. It wasn’t a great feeling, but I soldiered through the awkwardness.

By the time we were done with greetings, just about everyone in the family was fully aware of my situation - of my new reality. All it took was a couple statements from Megan followed by a torrent of whispers from my extended family members. I had a feeling that they wouldn’t be quite as accepting about all of this as Grandma had been.

The women started to migrate toward the kitchen while the men headed toward the couch to watch the Vikings game. After one glance at the men’s room, I made the executive decision to head into the kitchen. It would’ve been uncomfortable to be the only girl in a room full of guys. On top of that, I could only imagine the snarky comments floating around in Uncle Steve’s and my cousin Jake’s minds. They’d probably been generating insults ever since they saw the new me. I had always been such a rude smartass to them previously, in their minds I probably deserved this as

punishment. If Jarvis and Tina's treatment of me was any indication, Steve and Jake would make me pay relentlessly for my assholery. In their worlds, I was just a cartoonish villain.

Striding through the hallway toward the unmistakable smell of great cooking, my eyes were drawn to Grandma's wedding photos, which lined the walls. They were well-maintained, but their black and white coloring betrayed their ancient age. In each of them, both Grandma and Grandpa wore beaming smiles, and Grandma's beautiful white dress sparkled in the sunlight. Would that be me some day? My heart raced at the thought, and I took a few deep breaths to calm myself. Thankfully, I didn't have to start worrying about that any time soon, if ever.

I entered the bustling kitchen, which teemed with an army of aunts. Okay that was an exaggeration. There were actually only three aunts in attendance, along with Mom, Megan, and my cousin April. April was a college junior at the nearby University of Minnesota, and only came to family dinners once every few weeks. We never talked to each other much, and I always assumed that she hated me. Her hatred was justified, as well...

My thoughts were interrupted when my Mom shoved a bag of mushrooms into my hands. "Chop these up," she ordered. "They're going into the salad."

With that, I grabbed a knife and headed to an unoccupied cutting board, slicing away and trying to avoid cutting my dancing fingers. At least she hadn't made me dice the onions, I noted with a faint smile. As I chopped, it reminded me of making breakfast for Megan, and what she said when I gave it to her: 'you've changed.' It was true. A week ago, I would never have imagined myself helping in the kitchen, wearing a skirt, and loving a guy. However, that was what my life had become...and I was actually enjoying it. Despite the best efforts of Jarvis and his goons, this past week was both the most fun and memorable of my life.

"Johanna, right?" April tapped me on the shoulder. Her timing was just about perfect, as I'd just finished with the mushrooms. "Take this to the guys, would you?" She gestured down toward an hors d'oeuvre platter in her arms.

Just as pretty as Megan, April was a charming young woman with a breathy voice and expertly crafted eyebrows. She must have spent at least 30 minutes on her eyebrows alone. They looked amazing.

At family dinners, April was an ideal grand-daughter for Grandma, attentive and perfect in every way. Beneath that veneer, though, I suspected that the blue-eyed brunette was far more adventurous. Back when I was Joseph, I inspected her social media pages every now and again, and found ample evidence to back up my

suspensions. She attended a variety of wild parties, and was tagged in a few rave photos. On the other hand, she also did tons of charity work and was an excellent student. Everyone in my family seemed to love her, and she had more friends than she knew what to do with.

I had looked down on her for being two-faced. I even made a few mean comments directly to her about her partying, and threatened to tell her parents. Standing before her, as she presented the platter of appetizers, I began to realize the true motivation for my hostility: I was jealous. April gave me a glimpse at the kind of woman that my sister could become.

She was living a life of fulfillment and still having fun. Meanwhile, I had been wallowing in self-loathing, isolated from the world. 'Misery loves company', the age-old saying went. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was absolutely in misery. Not anymore, though. I was a new person.

"Are you alright?" April raised a concerned eyebrow, as I'd spent the last ten seconds contemplating my entire life rather than replying to her request.

I gave April an embarrassed smile and a nod, then gently took the platter from her. My heart began to beat steadily beneath my blouse as I walked into the living room. I'd mostly grown used to walking in heeled shoes, but carrying the platter was an added challenge. With every step, it grew a bit heavier and I would die of embarrassment if I accidentally dropped it.

Fortunately, I didn't. I placed the shining silver dish down quickly on the coffee table and tried to scurry out of the way as quickly as possible. I knew that the guys didn't enjoy it when people blocked their view of the television. To my surprise, a hand grabbed my wrist before I could leave, engulfing my slim forearm with ease.

"Is that really you in there, Joseph?" Uncle Steve asked, his eyes lighting up with mirth. He never liked me, and he was probably getting quite a kick out of this whole situation.

I didn't answer him, instead choosing to unflinchingly hold his gaze. I wasn't sure how to answer that question, to be honest.

"Your Dad was just saying it was a wishing stone?" he questioned. Dad was sitting right beside Steve as he interrogated me, so I felt more comfortable about this whole situation. Even though my father's eyes were trained at the football game on television, I knew that he was eavesdropping on our conversation, keeping tabs on me.

I nodded uneasily, taking a nervous gulp. I was still a bit off-put by Steve's physical contact, and felt a bit helpless.

He released his grip on my wrist and chuckled. "And yet we're still not billionaires!"

Rolling my eyes, my shoulders slumped and I took a step toward the kitchen. I didn't want to put up with his shit.

"Hey, hey, hey. I was just trying to be funny." He continued the conversation, although I avoided eye contact with him. "I'm sorry, Johanna." He put extra stress on my new name, as if he was proud that he'd remembered it. "Thanks for bringing out the food. You're a good niece." His voice sounded serious...sincere, even. That was the first time I'd ever heard him apologize for anything. Did he actually mean it? He didn't hate me?

Okay I mouthed, flashing a brief, forced smile before darting back into the kitchen.

God, that whole exchange was awkward, but it also went much better than anticipated. It seemed like everyone in my family was going out of their way to make me feel accepted...I just couldn't wrap figure out why that would be. From their perspective, I - the most insufferable family member - took a wishing stone and turned myself into a girl, and then removed my own voice. I fully anticipated that they'd all treat me like an outcast or an idiot...but they didn't. Was this all dream? I pinched my arm just to be sure, confirming that this was undoubtedly real.

Once dinner began, I helped bring out the food and serve it. This was the moment I'd been dreading, as I imagined I'd feel like a servant...but I didn't. After all, somebody had to make sure that the food got onto the table. If anything, my family members - especially the women - appreciated my contributions to the dinner preparations. It was a bit frustrating that I was expected to cook and whatnot after becoming a girl. I thought this was the 21st century? However, for the first time at one of these dinners, people actually seemed to appreciate my presence, which was beyond gratifying.

I didn't have quite as much room in my stomach and there was less social pressure for me to gobble down plates of meat, so I managed to finish my smaller meal rather quickly. As an unfortunate result, I was called back to the kitchen to help Grandma with preparing dessert. I couldn't remember the last time we'd spent time alone together, as I never helped with stuff like this in the past.

The kitchen seemed gigantic when it wasn't crowded with countless other women. In the tranquility, I noticed a familiar old object hanging off of the wall between two cabinets: the wooden spoon my Mom had told me stories about. The spoon that Grandma never wanted to dispose, despite its old age. The utensil was much like Mom had described it: showing lines of age on its mahogany face, curving slenderly down to a smooth handle. The handle's center rose in a mound, like a pregnant woman's belly, protruding out of the otherwise smooth wood. The spoon was likely a true gem back when it was crafted, but that age had long since passed. It might have possessed some

antique value but, based on Mom's story, a great deal of emotional value was placed in that curious spoon.

"Okay, sweetie. We're just going to do something simple tonight. Why don't you scoop the ice cream while I cut up these strawberries." It seemed as if Grandma had completely forgot about the 'gift' that she had promised me earlier in the night. I couldn't blame her, though. At 81 years old, she had been struggling with her short-term memory for almost as long as I'd been alive. It was sad to see. I still remembered growing frustrated with Grandma when she forgot to pick me up from summer camp, and I'd had to wait for five hours until she'd realized. That was a rough car-ride, to say the least. Looking back, I shouldn't have been so hard on her over that. She was probably even more frustrated than I was, and guilty as well. Her grandkids meant the world to her, and she did everything she could to make us happy.

I nodded to her request with a pleasant smile. That sounded easy enough. Rather than the wooden spoon, I opted for a classic ice cream scooper. Unfortunately, the vanilla ice cream was frozen solid, and I had to put all of my weight into each scoop. Grandma chose her dessert menu in bold defiance of the weather, sticking with ice cream rather than a more traditional winter delicacy. I guess that was the kind of woman she was: a lady of patterns and traditions, who resisted change whenever possible. Why had she accepted my new appearance so suddenly, then? Maybe she really was going senile...or perhaps there was more to her than I had previously assumed. As I scooped the rock-hard ice cream, Grandma spoke to me, much like Mom did when we were making breakfast.

"I remember when I was your age," her face lit up with joy and reverie. "Dancing and partying...Running around with boys." She sent me a sly grin. "Your grandfather was quite the dancer, did you know that?"

I shook my head No as a nascent smile graced my lips. She didn't talk about him too often, as if she was still struggling to accept his passing. She certainly never spoke about his dancing prowess.

"He was a regular Fred Astaire," her eyes shined reminiscently. Taking a beleaguered breath, she tried to disguise another nasty-sounding cough. "My advice? Find a man like him. A gentleman. If you go for anything else, you're wasting your time."

I nodded. Clark was a gentleman. Was he a good dancer? Probably better than I was...he was an athlete, after all. Plus, I'd seen him move around in 'the pocket', as Olivia called it. His feet were remarkably nimble. Whether or not he was a good dancer didn't really matter, though. That wasn't Grandma's point. At least, I suspected that it wasn't Grandma's point. Clark treated me well. He loved me. That was what counted.



After both dessert and the well-rehearsed farewell ritual, we headed home. In the car, Mom thanked me profusely for helping in the kitchen, which brought a blush to my cheeks. That was her way of reinforcing my behavior, I realized. She was really getting a kick out of all of this. She loved molding me into her perfect daughter. I didn't mind anymore, though. I was genuinely starting to enjoy my new role.

Once home, I played a couple games of Battlefield with my buddies. We had a good time, laughing and messing around. Some of the jokes were at my expense, about my transformation, but I tried not to take them too personally. I'd put a lot of work into controlling my temper. Why throw all of that work out the window over a couple of jokes? Plus, that would have destroyed the group's atmosphere. Nobody liked a buzzkill.

I stuck by my strict video game time limit rule, and stopped playing after the second game. Instead, I worked on my sign language, finished my homework, and practiced some calligraphy - which was getting fancier by the day. Previously, I'd thought that my handwriting was destined to be mediocre, but I couldn't have been more mistaken. After less than a week, my progress spoke for itself: my writing was kind've beautiful.

Laying in my bed, staring at the ceiling, I re-lived my entire day, but my memory was stuck on one event: my rough interview with Mr. Nordquist. He had judged me pretty harshly. I could sense it in the way he spoke, and the way his brow furrowed. Should I pick up an extra-curricular? A team sport, maybe? I'd tried basketball at P.E. and I sucked, but there were other sports...ice skating, skiing, soccer...cheerleading? Megan was on the squad, and could probably get me a spot. But was that what I wanted? I wasn't quite sure.

Biting my lip, I began the now-familiar process of wrapping my blanket around me to form a snug cocoon.

# CHAPTER 16

## *Into the Breach*

**B**eep. Beep Beep.

It was Monday morning. Monday meant P.E. Shit.

Rolling out of bed, I took a quick shower, put on some light makeup, and threw on my outfit. It was a typical winter outfit, with black butt-hugging pants, a blouse, a cardigan, a thick coat, and a cute scarf. Although I was new to this series of morning processes, I was already starting to get the hang of it. I gave myself a once-over in the mirror and nodded in approval. Today was going to be a big day. The trial in History class was set to start today, which offset the tragic inevitability of more harassment from my cruel tormentors.

To Mom's delight, I arrived downstairs early to help her cook breakfast: a simple dish of tomato omelettes. After a few minutes of learning under her careful guidance, I took over the cooking process. I'd begun to enjoy making breakfast. The morning wind whistled outside the window while I did a silly dance, sauntering from the mixing bowl to the stove-top. The aroma of delicious food filled the whole kitchen, while Mom told me all about her upcoming week at work.

She managed a nursing home, but had seldom discussed her work with me. That had changed, recently. There was drama at her nursing home and she suspected that one of her employees was consistently high during work hours. She walked me through all of the evidence, even wrinkling her nose as she recalled the employee's damning scent. As she continued talking, she eventually reached the conclusion that she should have a heart-to-heart with the employee. Had I helped her reach that conclusion? Maybe, maybe not...but I was always there to listen, and people seemed to appreciate that.

“You haven’t done any of those drugs, have you? I know that some kids your age…” Mom’s voice trailed off, and she took a glance away from the now-golden omelettes to give me a concerned look.

I shook my head with a soundless giggle. She worried about me far too much.

As we gave the omelettes their final preparations, Mom gave me a quick kiss on the forehead and thanked me for helping her, which filled my heart with warmth. She knew exactly how to make me feel special...as if I was the most important person on Earth.

I wolfed down breakfast right as Megan came downstairs in her cheerleading outfit. Taking my emptied plate to the sink, I took a peek out the window and stared into the abyss. In the past ten minutes, snow had begun to fall with fury. Visibility outside was less than a couple feet, obscured by wild swirls of white. Walking to school was no longer an option. I still wasn’t sure if I wanted to walk to school at all, considering what happened last week. I’d definitely have to hitch an early ride with Megan as she left for her morning cheerleading practice.

I waited patiently for Megan to finish her meal, then tapped on her shoulder and pointed at the snowstorm outside the window. She understood what I was trying to say, and the two of us headed off to school together. Even though it was storming, school wasn’t cancelled. This was just a short snowstorm, and it wasn’t supposed to last for more than a few hours.

\* \* \*

Once at school, we hurried inside the gym together. Most of the other cheerleaders were already there, standing around chatting with pom poms in their hands. Coach Wendt, the cheerleading coach, put a firm hand on my shoulder as I scurried toward the bleachers.

“Hey there,” she greeted me, before glancing between my face and Megan’s. “Are you Megan’s sister or something?”

I nodded and flashed her a pleasant smile. She was an intimidating, intense woman, with short hair and eyes that bore into my soul. A few inches taller than me, she inspected my frame from above. I couldn’t help but gulp.

“Why aren’t you on the team?” Wendt asked, visibly puzzled.

I chuckled nervously and shook my head, gesturing toward my mouth. I can’t cheer, I said.

“What?” Coach turned to Megan, perplexed. “Is she deaf?” she asked. I guess tact wasn’t in her playbook.

“No, she can hear fine. She just can’t say anything. Her name is Johanna,” Megan explained, as the other girls started to eavesdrop in our conversation.

“Does she have strep throat or something?” Coach Wendt looked genuinely puzzled, as if she’d never heard something so outlandish in her life.

“Oh, I think a wishing stone accident took away her voice or something. Someone told me it’s permanent.” One of the other cheerleaders butted into our conversation to explain. In the past, I’d probably be irked by such an intrusion, but that wasn’t my style anymore...nope.

Wendt winced with sympathy, as if to say ‘Oh, you poor thing.’ I guess I preferred this version of the rumor, as it made me seem more like a charity case and less like a ‘freak’.

“Well,” Coach Wendt began with a sigh, scratching at her short brown hair. “You don’t need to be able to cheer to be a cheerleader...you know what I mean. The offer’s there if you’re interested. Okay?”

I nodded and gave her another quick smile, before scrambling to the bleachers. If she had offered me a spot on the cheer team a week ago, my answer would have been a resounding ‘No’. Now, though, things were different. Sitting on the bleachers, crossing my legs and tapping my right foot against the seat in front of me, I bit my lip in contemplation. No, I wouldn’t join the team. I wasn’t ready for a commitment like that.

For a handful of minutes, I worked on my two apology letters. One for Tina, and one for Jarvis. I’d finally settled on the wording that I desired, and I had promised to Mom that I’d make amends with the pair, but...it still felt like a long-shot. I sighed. I needed to take my mind off of those letters.

Pulling out my phone, I browsed through a few Pinterest links that Caroline had sent me. Some of the stuff on that site was interesting and cute. Exploring it also helped me feel less left-out during conversations between Caroline and Olivia, as I browsed pictures of the various outfits that they’d mentioned the day before. I found a few interesting cooking recipes, but they seemed to be more focused on presentation rather than taste...maybe I’d give some of them a try, though. There was a fun recipe for mushroom-shaped meringues that I marked for future use, a small grin on my lips.

Before long, I grew bored of staring at my phone, and settled on watching the cheerleaders practice. As I studied their routine, I realized that I’d have to observe them twice today. Unless I wanted to walk home in a low-key blizzard with the threat

of being jumped again, Megan was my ride and the team had another after-school practice. Two practices per day seemed a bit excessive, but Coach Wendt seemed like a fairly demanding woman.

By the time Coach Wendt called for a final huddle-up, I'd already memorized the lines to many of the cheers. Most of them were fairly simple, with numerous variations of 'Go Wildcats'. I'd also paid close attention to the cheerleaders' positioning. Obviously, I hadn't actually made the motions myself, though, as I was sitting in the bleachers. They all moved with rehearsed skill and grace. It was really damned impressive.

A week ago, watching pretty girls prance around in cheerleading outfits would have been an amazing distraction. Now, though, I found myself wondering how I would look in one of those uniforms...probably like a smaller version of Megan, and she looked good. I closed my eyes and pictured myself making all the same motions as them. Damn, I could be really good at that...at least theoretically. I wasn't sure if I had the requisite athleticism or coordination to pull off some of the more difficult poses.

My thoughts were interrupted when Megan jostled my shoulder. "Were you sleeping? Geez, I didn't think we were that boring." Both she and Sarah giggled. Sarah had been flawless throughout the practice, which was fairly unsurprising since she was the team's captain.

My cheeks went bright red. She had no idea, but I hadn't been sleeping at all. In fact, my thoughts had been veering in an unforeseen direction. Embarrassed, I shook my head No, and hopped off the bleachers. Only a few minutes before classes started, and I had some serious soul-searching to do. Did I actually want to become a cheerleader?

I shook my head. Cheerleading? That was sheer silliness. I had bigger fish to fry...today was the big day. Physical Education was coming up, and I'd have to extend my olive branch to Jarvis and Tina, then hope for the best.

\* \* \*

"If it isn't Princess McBitchface." Tina smirked as she strolled into the girl's locker room.

Thankfully, I had arrived early and already gotten changed. I came prepared for this. I wanted to avoid as much conflict as possible, and to be ready for Tina's arrival. I clutched one of my two letters in my hands, my fingers trembling.

“What? Cat got your tongue?” Tina cackled at her own stupid joke. She wore a bright band in her golden hair, and sported the preppiest outfit imaginable, with a collared blouse and white capris.

I glanced at the floor, and clenched my jaw. I never imagined that this could be so hard. What if she read the letter and laughed at me? What if everyone in the locker room laughed at me, like they had in history class? No. I could do this. I had to do this. She might read the letter and still hate me, but...I had to do it. I bit my lip, trying to avoid Tina's glare, then carefully held the letter out toward her.

She accepted the letter skeptically, and began reading:

*Tina,*

*I'm sorry. I hurt you, years ago. I said terrible things, and treated you like I was superior, and generally acted like an asshole. I understand that now, and I don't think I'll ever be able to explain how sorry I truly am.*

*I have no intention of trying to justify my actions, but I do want to explain them. Back in Junior High, I lost my grandfather. He was the best friend I ever had, and I didn't know how to cope with his loss, so I lashed out. His loss hurt me, so I brought that pain into other people's lives. Into your life. You didn't deserve the way I treated you.*

*I can barely put this on paper without crying. I don't expect you to forgive me, and I don't expect to become friends, but I just want you to know that I'm sorry, and that I understand the consequences for my cruelty. I won't treat anyone like that, ever again, and I'll always strive to be a better person.*

*Johanna*

She looked up from the letter wide-eyed and, just for a moment, I thought that I spotted a shred of compassion on her face. Then, her lip curled into a smirk.

“What kind of bullshit is this?” Tina showed the note to her goons, who cackled in laughter. “Did your mom write this for you, or something? I've changed so much” she mimicked me, in a high, breathy voice. “I'm just a poor deaf girl, look at me! You really think I'm going to forget about what a piece of shit you are? That's priceless.”

Tina's familiar elbow pinned me against my closed locker door.

“You really shouldn't have punched me, either, you fucking bitch,” she whispered in my ear, quiet enough for only the two of us to hear. “I'm not going to do it here...but I will destroy you.” The words came out of her mouth effortlessly and full of conviction.

As she released me and sauntered away, I stood shaking. My lower lip trembled uncontrollably and my heart raced. Inside, I felt...empty. I knew that the letter was unlikely to fix all of my problems, but I couldn't fend off the sharp sense of hopelessness. Was she right? Had I really changed at all, or was I just acting out of

desperation? I shook my head emphatically. No. I was different, now, but Tina just couldn't admit that.

She wasn't being serious about her threat, was she? What did she mean by 'destroy'?

With a deep breath, I tried to erase that whole interaction from my memory. I took a chance, and it didn't work. She wanted me to be fearful and terrified, and I couldn't give her what she wanted. I couldn't let her win.

\* \* \*

I tried to flag down Jarvis after entering the gym. However, I wasn't quick enough. When I spotted him, Tina was already reading him the letter that I'd written for her, and they were both stifling laughter. I balled my hands into fists and fought back tears. The two letters were quite similar, and Jarvis would undoubtedly have the same reaction to my personalized letter for him. I clenched my teeth so hard that my jaw hurt, then went to the nearest trash can and ripped Jarvis's letter into shreds.

I'd poured my heart into those letters. I'd tried to apologize. As a result, I felt like the world's biggest idiot.

When Coach Tiller gruffly informed us of the sport we'd be playing, I knew that P.E. would be miserable. Dodgeball. I groaned. Hopefully I wouldn't have to face Jarvis, but something deep within me told me that I'd have to deal with the brute.

Much like basketball, Tiller selected a small handful of captains and they drafted their teams. Again, I was picked early by one of the more athletic guys. The grinning boy likely figured he would be able to carry the team, so he could waste a pick on some eye-candy. I guess that's all I was to some guys: just a pretty thing to look at. Considering I couldn't even hold a conversation, I really didn't blame them. Maybe they were right.

Our team captain tried to strike up conversation with me a couple times as our team formed. He abandoned his efforts after our conversations kept ending in tense silence. Then it dawned on me: this was what made Clark and me a perfect couple. He was both talkative and perceptive enough to maintain a real conversation with me. The mere thought of Clark brought warmth to my heart. For a second, I forgot all about the fact that I was potentially about to be playing dodgeball against both Jarvis and Tina.

Thankfully, our team's first game was against another batch of sane, normal individuals. It didn't take me long to figure out that dodgeball was not my sport. Even among the girls, I was noticeably lacking in upper-body strength. It was a frustrating discovery, to say the least. I struggled to get the ball to cross onto the opposing side of

the court with anything resembling velocity, even when I used two arms to throw it. After a few embarrassing throws, I opted to pass the balls to teammates and let them try their luck.

On the positive side, this meant that the people who actually knew how to play dodgeball and wanted to win weren't actively targeting me. They didn't see me as a threat, considering I seldom threw the ball. When I did eventually get hit, I was one of our team's few remaining players, and the ball was thrown in an intentionally soft arc toward me. In all honesty, I could have avoided the ball with ease. Instead, I stood still and let it hit me in the leg. Most of our team was on the sideline, and I didn't want to embarrass myself while everyone else watched. I used to have a faint competitive streak, but that had started to fade recently. Even before I became Johanna, my competitiveness only really applied to video games. I genuinely didn't care if our P.E. team won or lost. It just didn't matter, in the grand scheme of things.

Our next match was the one I had been dreading. We were up against the unforgiving Douchebag Duo: Jarvis and Tina, who prowled by his side like a crazy lioness. I swear I saw foam coming out of her mouth as she gave me a sinister grin. After coach blew his whistle for our game to start, I stood frozen in fear like a petrified sheep.

The game was over for me only seconds after it began. Jarvis and Tina had somehow convinced their entire team - probably via threats - to hurl all of their balls at me as hard as possible. As the torrent of red rubber balls came zooming my direction, I was too overwhelmed to process the situation. Instead, I was perfectly still when the first rubber sphere collided with my face with a brutal \*smack\*.

I didn't count how many balls hit me, but I probably set some sort of P.E. record. I quietly whimpered on the ground, hoping that I didn't bruise. I'd never been hit by anything that hard before. What if Clark saw me and I had a black eye? My silent whimpers turned into a dreadful voiceless groan, as my teammates paused the game to help me off the court.

A few minutes later, I was sitting in the bleachers with packs of ice on my cheek and leg. Fortunately, my face didn't seem to be swelling, but it still hurt. What the hell was wrong with them? I'd been a jerk to them in the past, but I'd never harmed them physically. I guess tormenting me was the most joyful part of their lives. With their newfound immunity, I was their favorite play-toy, to toss around and abuse with reckless abandon.

Every now and then, Jarvis and Tina would look my way and laugh at me as I spectated. There wasn't even a sliver of remorse in their mirthful eyes. They still saw



me as Joseph Larsen, the asshole who ruined their childhoods. How could I convince them otherwise, before something terrible happened? How far were they willing to go? I thought they would lose interest by now, but it seemed I was mistaken. The wishing stone had given both of them the ability to push boundaries to extraordinary lengths. They would likely go as far as they could until they met resistance. How far would that be? Kidnapping? Something even worse?

\* \* \*

“You seemed a little out of it at lunch. Are you sure you’re okay?” Clark asked, staring deep into my eyes. Of course, he knew I wasn’t okay. My cheek was still red from where the dodgeballs had hit me, but Clark wasn’t looking at my cheek. Instead, he studied my eyes as if they were a portal into my thoughts. Surely, he knew that my head was swimming with worries.

I nodded and forced a smile. I didn’t want Clark to get tangled up in this mess with Jarvis and Tina. Just by his grave countenance, I knew he would go to untold lengths in order to protect me. However, the ‘all-powerful’ Duncan family weren’t to be trifled with.

Clark’s concerns were interrupted by the bell, which marked the beginning of Genghis Khan’s mock trial. The student playing Genghis was a portly redheaded boy who was wearing a plastic viking hat - likely something he found laying around his house or picked up from a thrift store. Needless to say, the whole ‘trial’ was going to require some suspension of disbelief.

First, the prosecution gave its opening statement. Like ours, the prosecution team was comprised of both a boy and a girl, but I didn’t think they were as sharp as Clark and me. They seldom spoke up in class, and I never considered them to be strong students. However, I’d come to realize throughout the last week or so that my assumptions were often false. It was possible that the prosecution lawyers would surprise us with their skill. This trial wasn’t necessarily going to be a cake-walk, and our duo would have to perform flawlessly.

In many ways, our opposition’s opening statement was a best case scenario for us. It contained everything you’d expect, with general statistics about how many people Genghis Khan killed, and then wasted a number of minutes explaining why killing people was morally abhorrent. Of course, everyone knew that killing people was wrong...even most people who commit murder know that killing other people is wrong. Worse yet, there was no emotion in their opening statement, and it rested all

of their attack on a single, ill-developed argument. As soon as their weak speech wrapped up, I knew we had a strong chance of winning the trial's first day.

Sure enough, Clark confidently strode to the front of the classroom and delivered the initial nail in the prosecution's coffin. We had spent a couple of hours ironing out his opening statement, and it was chillingly good. He laid out our main argument, which was that Genghis' conquests had actually been a net positive force on the course of human history. It was anchored by three sub-points: that Genghis facilitated the spread of technology, religious freedoms, and women's rights. He offered elaborate supporting evidence for each of these points, and even went on to hint that revolutions in healthcare and farming negated casualties caused during Genghis' wars. Our stance was slightly utilitarian, but sometimes that was the most effective defence. At the conclusion of his speech, some of the jurors even clapped. This, of course, drew a scolding lecture on juror-objectivity from an annoyed Mrs. Peterson. After all, they were supposed to be neutral observers.

When the prosecution questioned their witnesses, I paid rapt attention and jotted down cross-examination questions for Clark to ask.

"So," Clark began, as he paced before the pensive Eastern European farmer whose crops had been destroyed during the conquests of Genghis Khan. In truth, the farmer was a guy with curly brown hair, who often sat in the back of class and consumed three sticks of gum per hour. Clark glanced down at the notecard I'd given him, which detailed a line of inquiry to be used against the farmer.

"How did you farm before Genghis Khan arrived?"

"How did I farm?" The guy replied in a confused tone, clearly unprepared for this question. "I dunno, a rake, I guess? A shovel? Some seeds? One of those watering cans?"

"Is that all?" Clark asked.

"I guess so," the farmer shrugged, still chewing his gum.

"And you were a subsistence farmer, right? You farmed enough for yourself and your family, and maybe sold a tiny bit to the local market?"

"Objection! Leading question," one of the zealous prosecution lawyers called out.

"Sustained," the judge weighed in, glad to finally have her input heard.

"Okay," Clark sighed, and disguised his smile. This was all going according to plan. It was a strategy that we had discussed the day before: loading details onto a question to steer the witnesses in certain directions, whether the question was over-ruled or not. Without background context, the farmer might deny being a 'subsistence farmer', but not after hearing Clark's fairly inaccurate definition of subsistence farming.

"Were you a subsistence farmer?"

“Yes,” replied the farmer.

“So, to re-cap: before Genghis Khan, you were only able to farm barely enough to survive, and you didn’t use livestock in your farming process. How did that change after Genghis Khan introduced livestock like oxen for you to use in the farming process?”

“Uhh...livestock?” the farmer stopped chewing his gum, clearly unprepared to answer that question.

“Would you say that your yearly yield increased after you started using livestock, and you were better able to feed your family?” Clark continued brutally, and I almost bounced in my seat with glee. He was too good at this.

“Uhh, no?” the farmer glanced desperately at the prosecution lawyers as they called out for various objections, but the damage had already been done.

“No further questions,” Clark hid a grin, and returned to his seat beside me. Sneakily, he reached over and gave my hand a light squeeze. Yet another nail in the prosecution’s coffin, as the farmer’s narrative was re-shaped to tell a tale of Genghis the hero. Of course, Genghis himself probably didn’t introduce livestock to Eastern Europe, and they likely used livestock to farm long before his invasion. Regardless, the farmer hadn’t contested the livestock-farming narrative, and our cross-examination proved victorious.

When our own witnesses came forward, Clark posed softball questions that we had developed together, each furthering one of our overall argument’s three prongs in some way. Hopefully Mrs. Peterson would notice my contributions to our team, although I was probably going to get an A on this project anyway. I could tell that Peterson was embarrassed, ashamed, and regretful over the fact that she had assigned me to a speaking role. It would be a pity A, but an A nevertheless. I’d take it.

After the final bell rang, Clark grabbed my hand and gave me a surprise peck on the cheek.

“You’re the best partner in the world,” he whispered into my ear, as my cheeks blushed bright red. Glancing around, I had no doubt that the entire class had seen his display of affection.

In a moment of bravery, I gave him a peck on the cheek in return. I wasn’t going to let him look silly alone. I loved him.

\* \* \*

I yawned as I sat in the bleachers, watching over today's second cheerleading practice. The gym was large, but seemed crowded with student-athletes. Apparently, everyone scheduled their practices for the afternoon, and the gym had to be shared between the cheerleaders and both basketball teams - the girls' and the boys'. As a result, the cheerleaders and I were relegated to one small corner of the court. I'd finished all of my homework ages ago, and continued studying the girls' movements, my head resting on my knees as I hugged my legs to my chest. I considered watching Clark's football practice instead, but it was Monday, which meant weight day for the football team. They'd be in the weight room, lifting weights, straining their muscles, all hot and sweaty...maybe I'd stop by later. I licked my lips at the thought.

I'd memorized almost all of the cheers by now, choreography included. It was a surprisingly beautiful sight. Everyone on the team was excellent, with precise movements and near-perfect synchronization. 'Go Wildcats,' the familiar call resounded throughout the gym for the umpteenth time, reminding me once more why I would never be a cheerleader. Despite what Coach Wendt had told me, a cheerleader who couldn't cheer wasn't a true cheerleader at all. She'd only said that to make me feel better about myself...which was odd, considering she was a brutally honest woman.

After a few more minutes of mesmerizing dance, Coach Wendt called the girls into a circle and gave a short speech. As she did, I closed up my backpack and hopped off the bleachers, anticipating that the practice would end soon.

"You! Megan's little sister." Coach Wendt waved me toward the circle, and I hesitantly approached. "Here," she said, ripping a piece of paper off of her clipboard and thrusting it into my hands. "Get this back to me before the end of the week. As soon as you get that signed, you can start practicing. Capiche?"

Confused, I nodded. Quickly scanning the paper in my hands confirmed my suspicions: it was a waiver. A waiver required to join the cheerleading team.

"Welcome to the team." Coach Wendt said with a rare, rough smile. I glanced around the circle, and saw that all of the other girls were smiling at me as well. Holy shit, they seriously wanted me to join the team?

Unsure of what to do, I mouthed the word Thanks? and flashed a nervous grin. Did I want to join the team? I guess I'd have a few days to discover the answer to that question. It seemed as if all of them expected me to join the team, like it was a foregone conclusion.

I was still in mild shock as Megan drove us home. A cheerleader? Was that really who I was? This was all moving so fast. Too fast? Back when I was Joseph, I used to

think they were all a bunch of prissy show-offs. Now, I wasn't so sure. All of Megan's friends treated me nicely, and I even considered Sarah to be my friend. They'd probably all discussed whether or not they wanted me on the team before extending me the offer. It'd be extremely rude of me to turn it down. Plus, it might win me some favor with Clark's Dad. Okay, I was sold. I was going to be a cheerleader.

\* \* \*

"How's the situation with the Duncan boy?" Mom asked, sitting beside me on my bed. She rested a comforting hand on my shoulder, beaming down at me with a loving smile. She came in unannounced while I was playing Battlefield, and I had to ditch my friends in the middle of the game. I still felt a bit guilty about it, since the score was pretty tight, but I figured that Mom was more important than a video game. We'd shared some information about our day, and I'd written her a nice description of my trial, but her expression betrayed the true reason for her visit: she was worried about me.

In response to her question, I stared at my carpet and shrugged.

"Did you apologize to him?"

I bit my lip, almost hard enough to draw blood, and nodded.

"It didn't go well, I take it?"

I didn't answer, maintaining my stare with the carpet.

"Oh, hun," Mom sighed. She wrapped her arm around me, and nudged my head into the nook between her shoulder and neck.

In my mind, I began cycling through the unpleasant options that I could pursue, to escape Jarvis's retribution. Each option was less appealing than the last. Hopefully, he'd just get bored of tormenting me, or he'd change schools...maybe I could change schools...but I was just starting to make friends for the first time in my life. I'd rather get the shit beat out of me every day than live a life without friends.

"I'm glad that you tried to repair things on your own. In the meantime, though, I talked to his parents. They're decent people, and they'll make sure that he'll never do something like that again. Just because people are successful doesn't mean they have to be evil."

I fought off the urge to roll my eyes. His parents must have given him the lightest slap on the wrist, because he was as brutal and scary as ever. They probably took away his stash of twinkies and grounded him for a day, if that. I shook my head ever-so-slightly in disdain. 'Successful.' One errant wish and they were 'successful' all of the

sudden, and universally revered. Mom was right, to an extent. Success doesn't only come to evil people...but it wasn't exclusive to good people, either.

"I think their son is just very confused, and takes out that confusion on you. Do you think...do you think he likes you?"

I gave her the stink eye, furrowing my brow. I had no doubt that Jarvis was attracted to me. Along with the way he leered at me to the crass comments he made about my appearance, I knew he got hard almost every time he saw me. Hell, the wording of his wish could have guaranteed that he was attracted to my 'hot chick' body. That was part of why Tina hated me, I suspected: jealousy. Jealousy mixed with straight-up revenge. I used to think that she legitimately thought I was a 'freak' and hated me out of principle, but I slowly realized that I was mistaken. I saw it in her eyes: she wanted Jarvis to leer at her the same way he looked at me. The tragic irony was that I didn't want any of Jarvis' attention. She could have him all to herself...I'd prefer if he never looked at me again.

In the end, Jarvis' attraction to me didn't make a difference. The way he acted upon that attraction was dangerous and outright frightening. He was obsessive, unforgiving, psychotic, and wildly unpredictable. With my apology letter, I'd extended him an olive branch - and I was glad that I had - but he'd broken that branch in two and made his intentions clear.

Pulling out the cheerleading form and handing it to Mom, I forced a change of subject. I had no interest in discussing Jarvis any more than necessary. Unconsciously, my hand drifted to my cheek, where the first dodgeball had smacked me. I wish he would just disappear from my life, and never return.

Upon receiving the papers, Mom squinted her eyes and studied it closely. I needed her signature if I wanted to be a cheerleader...a cheerleader. The mere thought brought nervous energy, causing my stomach to flutter.

"Are you sure this is what you want, sweetie?" Mom disguised a sly grin as she read through the paperwork. She wasn't too involved in Megan's cheerleading, but she would never miss an opportunity to see me become more like my sister.

I nodded dutifully, producing a smile of my own. I'd made my decision and I was sticking to it.

"Alrighty then." With one swipe of the pen, she signed her name and handed the form back to me. Just like that, it was official. I was a cheerleader for the Cheran High Wildcats. My heart raced as Mom tucked me into bed and headed downstairs, out of excitement more than anything else. I'd never done something like this before, and I was bursting with energy.

Bouncing down onto my bed, I pulled out my phone and texted Caroline and Olivia the news. They'd probably have a laughing fit. Sure enough, they replied with "LOL" and a ballerina cat gif, respectively. Smiling at the ceiling, I let my long hair splay around me in a circle. I loved my hair...hell, I loved my life.

# CHAPTER 17

## *Practice Makes Perfect*

“**M**mm,” I murmured noiselessly, as a few rays of morning sun streamed through the window and illuminated my face. With a yawn, I brushed a dangling strand of hair out of my face, tucking it behind my ear. Monday had been a crazy, wild ride. Just thinking about that whole day made my heart race. I was going to be a cheerleader, and we were winning our trial, and...

Wait a minute...it was Tuesday. Tuesday!

I shot out of bed with electricity after fully processing that information. Tuesday! Tonight, Clark and I were going out on our first real dinner date! My eyes opened wide.

With newfound determination and glee, I darted to the bathroom and dutifully began my morning routine: shower, hair, teeth, and makeup, followed by the daily school outfit dilemma. I settled on a horizontally striped scoop neck with a cardigan, skirt, and leggings. It was a girly outfit, yes, but I was a girl...and those sorts of outfits had grown on me, over the past week or two. That wasn't what I'd be wearing to the date, though. My breath caught just thinking about the stunning blue dress that I'd picked out...well, I guess Sarah technically picked it out...but I'd given the elegant fabric my final approval. Our date was going to be perfect, and nothing was going to mess it up.

Bursting with energy, I finished my preparations in record time and arrived downstairs right as Mom strolled out of her bedroom, yawning loudly in her morning robe.



“What’re you all cheery about?” She beamed at me in amusement. I hadn’t realized it, but a smile had been pasted on my face ever since I hopped into the shower. Mom knew the answer to her question, as I’d already told her about our date.

Still grinning, I shrugged.

“Oh yeah? So you’re getting secretive now, huh?” She teased. “It wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain boy, would it?” For some reason, both her and Megan found my love life to be cute and hilarious. They poked fun at me over it, and giggled with youthful glee. However, deep down I knew they were genuinely happy for me.

As we cooked up some french toast, she talked with me...well...to me, and fell into her protectionist Mom mode. After all, I was her ‘little slice of sunshine,’ as she’d embarrassingly begun to call me. It never failed to turn my cheeks crimson.

“What time do you think you’ll be coming home? You know it’s a school night, right?” The juxtaposition of those two questions left no doubt in my mind: she wanted me home early.

I shrugged and then flashed all ten of my fingers once, to signify 10:00pm. 10:00 seemed reasonable, right? Feeling a bit cheeky, I then held up a single index finger, bringing the total to 11:00pm.

Her eyes went wide and she tilted her head slightly, as if to say ‘Oh no you won’t.’ Rather than vocalizing a suggested time, she flashed all ten of her fingers a single time: 10:00pm. She crossed her arms sternly.

Instead of arguing, I just nodded my head and wrinkled my nose, then flipped over the toast. I liked the fact that we were able to communicate without speaking...it made me feel a little less alone in the world.

“Good,” she grinned, peering over my shoulder to inspect the toast. “You’re way easier to deal with than Megan ever was.”

I guess that was a fair assessment. When Megan started dating, she went through a fairly rebellious phase and refused to talk to Mom or Dad for over a month. I would never go out of my way to make their lives harder in any way...not anymore. I’d made a pledge to be a better person, and I was going to do my best to stick with it.

Instead of trying to reply to Mom’s observation, I sniffed lightly. The french toast cooking on our stovetop was making the whole kitchen smell wonderful. Cinnamon and butter, one of the most delicious combinations in the world. We’d have to make this more often. Recently, I’d been paying more attention to the texture and beauty in food...going more for quality over quantity. In the past, I used to scarf down as much food as I could, but those days were no more. Was it due to my newfound appreciation for cooking, or was that change due to other factors? I suppose I’d never know. So

much was shifting in my life, tracking the origin of each change was destined to be a fruitless endeavor.

“Do you know what you’re going to wear?” She asked with a raised eyebrow.

Crossing my arms, I sent her a look that screamed ‘Seriously?’, which caused her to crack a clever smile once again. In turn, I pursed my lips and gave her another look of disapproval. Of course I knew what I was wearing, how could she possibly think otherwise? Wait...she was just teasing me again. A thin grin spread onto my lips.

You’re sooooo funny, I mouthed with a deadpan eyeroll. I wasn’t sure if Mom was able to decode my whole sentence, but she definitely understood the message.

A blue dress, I added, mouthing the words. Unfortunately, Mom wasn’t looking at my lips when I spoke. Yet another sentence of mine that fell silent upon the world. That was fine, though. Sometimes I was able to communicate, and other times I wasn’t. That was all part of being Johanna. I guess Mom wouldn’t know about my dress until she saw me wearing it.

Mom continued to push my buttons, until her attention was drawn away as Megan came scampering down the stairs. She was fully decked out in her trim cheerleading outfit and cute white sneakers.

“What the hell are you wearing?!” Megan gasped when she saw me setting the table for breakfast.

Confused, I just stood there and shrugged. What did she mean? Obviously, I was going to change before my date with Clark. We were going somewhere fancy, after all.

“Umm...Johanna, you can’t wear those to cheerleading practice.” She eyed my shoes, which were a pair of boots with a low heel.

My eyes went wide, mortified as I realized my mistake. I’d been so fixated on my date with Clark that I’d forgotten my other new obligation. I usually never dropped the ball on things like that.

“It’s fine,” Megan reassured me. “I’ve got some old tennis shoes that probably fit you, and I still have my old cheer uniform from like...Freshman year. You don’t want to have to buy a new one, do you?”

After a moment of hesitation, I shook my head. I’d gone through all of last week wearing Megan’s old clothing, why throw a hissy fit demanding a new cheerleading outfit? I might as well use her old one.

Following Megan upstairs, I started to reconsider whether or not I actually wanted to be a cheerleader. Was I was just doing this to appease other people? If that answer to that question was ‘yes’, did it even matter? Maybe I should take their opinion into

account. Maybe I'd really enjoy being a cheerleader...I suppose that if I never tried it, then I'd never know. I'd give it my best try.

Megan handed me a cheerleading outfit and plopped down onto her bed, looking at me expectantly.

"Are you gonna put it on?" she asked, staring at me as if I was acting weird.

I'd never changed in front of her before, but she seemed to act like it wasn't a big deal. Okay...she was still staring at me. She definitely wanted me to change my clothes as she looked on.

She rolled her eyes, then moved her hands to block her own vision. "I won't peek."

With an uneasy nod, I shed my cardigan and pulled my blouse over my head, careful not to mess up my hair. Stripping out of my pants, my cheeks burned. I stood only in my black panties and bra. I slid into the cheer skirt and matching top, then tugged on Megan's sleeve, to signal that she could open her eyes.

A cooing 'aww' escaped Megan's lips.

"You look great!" She giggled. From her endearing tone of voice, it seemed as if she meant to say 'cute' rather than 'great'. I'd gotten angry at her in the past for treating me like an adorable play-toy, but I'd probably been too harsh on her. It was okay - albeit somewhat embarrassing - for her to call me cute and talk to me as if I was a curious doe. It was just her way of showing affection for me. I'd have to be more understanding of that, because I knew that she really did love me, deep down.

I flashed her a sheepish smile, then took a moment to size myself up in the mirror. Holy shit. 'Great' didn't even begin to describe my appearance. I was actually a cheerleader. My white cheerleading top read 'Cheran Wildcats', and featured a small depiction of a puma. It hugged my chest tightly, my two mounds popping outward against the fabric. My thighs were hugged by a green skirt that only covered a limited stretch of my slender legs, leaving much of my thighs exposed. Megan's box even carried an extra pair of white and green pom-poms, which I held lackadaisically in my left hand. Wearing this get-up, I looked like a gorgeous actress in a high school movie, playing the role of a cheerleader. All I could do was stare in awe.

"Oh my God. Yeeees! You're so freaking adorable." Megan fawned over me as I strode down the stairs, collecting my long raven-black locks and using a hair tie to pull them into a ponytail.

I licked my lips and rolled my eyes. Megan sure knew how to embarrass me...I just hope she didn't act like this at practice.

After she inhaled her breakfast, Megan drove me down the icy road to practice. It wasn't until we were already walking into the gym when I realized my colossal mistake. While I was busy changing into my cheerleading outfit and ogling myself in the mirror, I'd completely forgotten to pack a change of clothes. Crap.

As we neared the gym doors, I conveyed this crisis to Megan. Gesturing down at my outfit, I showed her the contents of my backpack: nothing but books. On my shoulders was my newly purchased leather jacket, which shielded me from the elements. Besides that, though, I was utterly screwed. I would be stuck wearing my cheerleading outfit the entire day. My thoughts had been all caught up in my date with Clark and the new cheerleading outfit...I couldn't believe that I'd forgotten to pack my regular outfit.

"So what? You'll be wearing a cheer skirt all day. Big deal. Sis, there are worse things to be than a pretty cheerleader. Stop worrying about everything."

She was right, as she often was. After a few low, deep breaths, I was able to calm myself. It wouldn't be that bad. I might get teased and whatnot, but the status of 'cheerleader' was mostly a badge of honor. Plus, in the future I would be cheering at sporting events and competitions...I knew that when I signed up. Being a cheerleader was a public commitment, and one I would have to grow used to. Maybe I could even benefit from wearing the outfit all day.

Walking through the front doors and into the warmth of the gym, I made a beeline to Coach Wendt. She greeted me with a rare smile on her lightly wrinkled face when I handed her the signed release form. Scratching her short-cut hair with her unpainted nails, she shoved the form into the back of her gym shorts. Just like that, I was officially a cheerleader.

"Alright then. I'll add you to the roster and you're good to go." She nodded at me and then turned to the rest of the girls. "Let's get it started! I trust you'll all find time to introduce yourselves to..." she glanced at me, then down at the release form, "Johanna." I had a feeling I'd always be 'Megan's little sister' to her. That was okay, I guess. Not everyone was good with names...maybe it was something that Coach Wendt really struggled with. I shouldn't judge her for it.

As it turned out, there was a stark difference between watching a practice from the bleachers and actually participating in one. I knew the movements I was supposed to make, but actually forcing my body to do them was a whole different ball-game. While the other girls had months or years of muscle memory and fitness to support them, I was visibly lacking in those fields. Every turn, every spin, every movement of my arms was just a little bit off.

‘Focus, Johanna.’ I thought to myself, trying my absolute best to match Sarah’s precise movements. Frustratingly, I’d been placed directly next to her, the team’s seasoned Senior captain. At first, I assumed that Coach Wendt would switch things up and put someone else next to me once she realized how it brought even more attention to my mistakes. She never did change our arrangement, and I found myself next to Sarah for the entire practice. By the third or fourth cheer, I came to the realization that Coach Wendt knew exactly what she was doing. She was trying to motivate me to get better as soon as possible, by making my inadequacies abundantly clear. Wendt’s plan seemed to work, as well. By the end of practice, I was emotionally and physically spent.

Wendt hadn’t even forced me into doing any crazy routines. I was exhausted simply by dancing around in delicately choreographed sequences. I didn’t have to do any flips, cartwheels, or ‘stunts’, as Wendt called them. ‘Stunt’ was a word that described any variation of the human pyramid and elevated jumping, it seemed. I used to think that there was only one way to do a human pyramid, but I was very, very wrong. While I watched, the other girls had run through an abundance of formations, one of the most interesting being the Victory formation, where three cheerleaders hold up a fourth in the air, who stands on a single leg. The dismount was a jumping spin, with so much velocity that I almost gasped. Of course, she landed safely in the arms of three teammates. Sarah was the only member of the team to take the top of that particular formation and be a “flyer”. The sheer amount of faith required to take a leap like that was astounding and, fortunately, I wasn’t expected to do any of those wild stunts.

Nevertheless, my arms ached, my legs ached, my whole body ached. I felt light-headed as Coach called us in for the final huddle, but I mustered all of my strength to stay upright. I didn’t want to be remembered as the girl who fainted during her first cheerleading practice.

“Go Wildcats!” I silently yelled once more, before groaning with exhaustion as our huddle broke apart.

“Oh my God, you did amazing! How did you know all of our routines so well?” Sarah wrapped an arm around my shoulder, engulfing me and helping me walk to our backpacks.

I shrugged and blushed. Fighting to conceal a proud smile, I pointed two fingers at my own eyes, then at her.

“Oooh I’ve got my own stalker.” She pulled me closer and we both giggled as we grabbed our backpacks. She headed toward the locker room while I began to split off toward the hallway.

“You aren’t going to change?” She raised an eyebrow, and brushed a sweat-drenched blonde lock out of her face.

I replied with a shrug, gesturing down at my clothing.

“Rookie mistake,” she said with the faintest of smirks. “Well, at least take a shower. You don’t want to go to class all sweaty.”

Hesitantly, I nodded and followed her into the locker room. I’d avoided showering after P.E, even when I was a guy...but I’d also never worked quite this hard during P.E. My eyes went wide open as I stepped into the communal shower section of the girl’s locker room. The whole squad was showering and they were all...all naked. I wanted to close my eyes. Even though I knew I was a girl and I didn’t find any of them sexually attractive, it was just...different. I guess I hadn’t really ever seen a naked girl other than in the mirror. What if they got angry that I was showering with them? What if they thought I was a creep?

Gulping past a lump in my throat, I took off my outfit and stepped onto the white tiles of the shower area. I tried to stare at the floor as I padded toward an unoccupied shower-head next to Megan. Were the other girls staring at me? After a quick glance around the shower, I determined that they weren’t. The other girls were all occupied with their own business.

Carefully, I turned it on and let the cool water run over my skin. I felt the urge to shield my breasts and nethers as I showered, but decided against it. I had to show that I was comfortable with my body. If I didn’t, it would only make things more awkward.

I hadn’t brought my own soap or anything, so I had to borrow some from Megan. When she handed her bottle of soap to me, I got a full view of her naked body. I tried not to stare, but geez...her boobs were huge. They made mine look like tiny orbs. She was at least a DD...I guess I knew they were bigger than mine, but I had no idea they were that big. My eyes went wide with both amazement and fear. Hopefully mine never got that big...how did she comfortably sleep at night?

“No staring. That’s so rude.” She teased with a devious grin, as she turned back to her shower. Reading my mind, she continued. “Don’t worry, yours won’t get this big. I was basically done growing by your age. Those bras you borrowed were from like 8th grade.”

My cheeks burned, and I took a deep, calming breath. Coyly, I studied my own breasts as I lathered my body in soap. I was a solid C cup, and I was perfectly happy with that fact. My skin was delightfully smooth, and my frame so compact...I never realized it before, but I really enjoyed my body. The way my smooth skin felt when water ran over it, the sensation of my long hair cascading over my shoulders, even

down below...the current situation between my legs was a bit more comfortable than before. Of course, I hadn't yet had a period, so that judgement could change in the future. All in all, however, my body was nice. I was lucky.

Although she embarrassed me a bit, Megan's antics had made me feel a lot more relaxed in the communal shower. By the time I stepped out and began to towel-dry myself, I was no longer nervous or fretful. There was nothing to be ashamed of. I was a girl and they were girls. Even more importantly, we were all teammates.

# CHAPTER 18

## *Fleeting*

Walking down the hall, I zipped up my leather jacket and tightened my backpack straps. Still, I was wearing a telltale green cheerleading skirt which revealed almost the full length of my legs, a rare sight considering the frigid temperature outside. As a result, I attracted far more stares than I'd appreciate. It seemed like every guy I passed peered at my exposed legs, and undressing the rest of my body with eager eyes. I tried to ignore them. My eyes trained forward, I trekked onward to Geology class.

"Holy shit," Caroline muttered when I took my seat beside her. "There's no way you're actually Johanna. Megan, is that you? Did you take shrinking pills or something?" She poked my shoulder teasingly, as a knowing smile spread across her face.

I rolled my eyes and blushed, cloaking a grin with my hand.

"What. The. Hell. You actually joined the cheerleading team?" She left her mouth hanging open, as if she was searching for words and failing to find them. "Did your sister force you to do it or something?"

Still grinning, I shook my head No. I chose this. I wanted this.

"You're incredible. Has anyone ever told you that before? Absolutely fricken incredible. You turn into a girl and a couple weeks later you're a cheerleader and you're dating my brother?" She shook her head in disbelief and giggled. "I know you told me that the wish was an accident...but was it? Are you sure you didn't want all of this?"

I shrugged. To be honest, I wasn't certain anymore. All I knew was that I was enjoying my life for the first time ever. With a happy sigh, I took out my whiteboard and wrote Thanks for being my best friend ever, with a little heart over each of the i's.



It was cheesy, but it was the truth. I'd never felt so close to anyone before, as a friend. We had only really known each other for a short time, but I felt like I could tell her anything. Well...almost anything. I still hadn't told her about Jarvis and his connection to the wishing stone incident, nor about his and Tina's constant torment, their quest for revenge. I didn't want to cause her any worry. Those bullies would eventually relent. They'd get bored, right? They'd eventually accept my apology, and come to terms with the fact that I wasn't Joseph anymore...either that, or this crisis would end rather poorly.

When she saw what I'd written, she chuckled and her eyes started to water. With a practiced cough, she did her best to disguise the fact that she was on the verge of crying.

"You're my best friend, too."

Our sappy moment was interrupted by Mr. Bradley's soothing voice. His baritone had all the same qualities as a cozy fire, brimming with knowledge.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Bradley announced, striding in front of a large plate tectonics map with bold fault lines. I swear he purposefully glanced my way when he said 'ladies.' "Never expect perfection from geologists," he paused, to scan the room with his eyes, like a comedian reading his crowd. As he opened his mouth to continue, a faint smile worked its way onto his face.

"We all have our faults."

The entire class groaned collectively, as they often did when Mr. Bradley brought out his geological puns. Apparently, he'd left all of the printed test materials at home, and we wouldn't be taking any examinations today. I was truthfully a bit peeved, because I knew that I would ace any Geology test I took. Given how I wasn't able to participate in class anymore and answer questions, it was more difficult for people to identify me as a bright student. Tests were one of the few ways I could still validate my intelligence. Truth be told, that was a pretty selfish and insecure line of reasoning. Why did I have to impress everybody? I shook my head and stopped rubbing my eraser against my desk. I couldn't let myself get bogged down with what other people thought of me...I had to be stronger than that.

\* \* \*

The next couple hours flew by, and before I knew it I was on my way to lunch. Once more, I got a thorough optical pat-down from almost every guy in the hallway. It was almost as if the cheerleading uniform had some sort of magical charm about it, luring

men in like moths to a light. Obviously, the outfit was just a few pieces of fabric, but it represented so much more. It would forever label me as one of the popular girls, with no shortage of connections, attractiveness, and work ethic.

My skin began to tingle as I approached the cafeteria. I was about to see Clark for the first time today. What would he think about the fact that I'd joined the cheerleading team? My thoughts were all wrapped up with Clark, and my heart pounded to a thrilling rhythm.

In a mildly rare incident, I was one of the first people to arrive at the cafeteria. My math teacher had been generous and let the class out early, so I'd have first dibs on the soggy yellowing broccoli and rubber-like cheese pizza. Apparently, tomato sauce was too expensive or inefficient, so our 'pizza' was literally a layer of reheated cheese atop a triangle of stale bread.

I got my prison food while it was still hot, and carefully sat down my tray at our usual eating spot. Conscious of my relatively short skirt, I crossed my legs tightly and straightened the green fabric as well as possible. With a deep anticipatory breath, I watched the flow of students entering the cafeteria, eager to catch a glimpse of my friends. Friends. My heart soared at the mere thought. In the wild world of Cheran High, I'd finally attached myself to a group of people who wanted me to sit near them. This little slice of the long, plastic bench was ours. Our territory, our home. It was kind've beautiful.

As I picked at my unappetizing food, the cafeteria began to fill up with milling students. Their collective chatting created a low roar. Thankfully, it wasn't long before I heard that warm, familiar voice which made my ears perk up.

"I didn't believe it when Caroline texted me...why didn't you tell me?" Clark sat down extremely closely to me and he reached his hand near my chest. I took a sharp, excited breath, unsure of what he was about to do. I exhaled as he opened up my jacket in one swift movement, revealing my top. 'Cheran Wildcats' my cheerleading top read, the words pasted across my chest.

"Hey Mom," Clark picked up his phone and raised it to his ear, clearly pretending to call his mother. "Yeah, I just found out I'm dating a cheerleader. Yeah, I know...yeah. She looks unbelievable. Definitely the prettiest girl in the world."

I punched his arm playfully and blushed bright red. He sure knew how to tease me effectively. Why was everyone teasing me lately? Nobody really used to tease me playfully like this, only maliciously. On second thought, I didn't really have many friends before, either...and Clark's playfulness definitely bordered on the edge of flirting.

After Clark's chuckles died away, his face turned a bit more serious. "I'm honestly so proud of you. I know it's not easy to get into new things...when I got the text I did my touchdown dance."

I raised an eyebrow, still fighting off a blush. Touchdown dance?

"Seriously, watch." He began to do a silly choreographed dance, moving his hands and shoulders as if he was an '80s disco star. The ridiculous routine only made me blush harder. Self-consciously, I glanced around the cafeteria to see if anyone was staring at us. Only a few people were watching, but that did little to quell my embarrassment.

Desperate to make him stop, I grabbed his bicep with both hands and tugged on it. His arms were so massive that it was almost pointless, but he understood my intentions and decided to stop the silliness. Curious, I tried to wrap both hands around his bare bicep, and found that my fingertips only barely connected with each other. Unconsciously, I started to trace the big, blue vein along his upper arm with one of my sparkly fingernails. Geez, he was muscular. I looked up at him with dreamy, longing eyes, and he held my gaze.

"Uhh, what are you two doing there, lovebirds? Didn't mean to interrupt." Caroline asked with a stifled giggle, bringing me back to Earth.

She and Olivia sat down near us, their plates full of prison food. Accompanying Olivia was her boyfriend Brandon. She'd told me he was a linebacker, and he certainly looked every bit of it. He was huge and thickly muscled, with a friendly face. However, he nowhere near as hot as Clark, I noted with a smug grin. Was it wrong for me to think that? No...Clark was a catch, and I was right to be proud.

The two boys chatted about God knows what while we planned another sleepover for the coming weekend. My mind was elsewhere, though...all I was thinking about was my date with Clark, and what the future held.

\* \* \*

I took a nervous glance at the clock, which read 6:57PM. Anxiously, I crossed my legs and tapped my five-inch heel against the living room hardwood in a steady rhythm.

"Stop worrying, sis. You look amazing." Megan commanded with a soothing smile, as he sauntered out the front door and headed to her boyfriend's house. Damn, I couldn't believe that I used to write her off as cruel and annoying. I'd totally overlooked her positive attributes. She was a loving sister, a great friend, and she

exuded confidence. I couldn't believe I was admitting this, but I wished I was a bit more like her.

Exhaling a calming breath, I eyed the pretty blue dress that clung to my figure. Megan hadn't been lying, I did look damned good. I wasn't quite as worried about that anymore, though. I couldn't place a finger on why my heart pounded with such urgency...I knew Clark loved me and I knew I was gorgeous. Maybe I was excited about the possibilities...the official-ness of all of this. Perhaps what I was feeling was not exhilaration, but stress. Maybe it had something to do with the rushing manner of our relationship, and I was worried it would all fall apart. Truth be told, I wasn't sure. We seemed like such a perfect match, but we'd only known each other for a couple weeks. Did we really understand each other?

My thoughts were interrupted by three strong knocks on the front door. I took a breath, briefly closed my eyes, and opened the door. I was greeted by both the frigid cold outdoors, which my fur coat dutifully fended off, and the Clark's nervous, grinning face. To my delight, my high heels almost brought me to Clark's height...almost. I was still an inch or two shy of his mark, but I didn't feel like a midget anymore.

We had both agreed to dress up nicely for this date, and he certainly didn't disappoint. He was looking dapper in his sharp suit with a tasteful red tie and a matching pocket square. To my surprise, the suit actually fit him. He must have detected my emotions rather acutely, because he quickly explained that all the guys on the football team had their suits professionally fitted so that they wouldn't embarrass the school at alumni and charity events. He certainly had a knack of knowing exactly what I was thinking at any given time. It was uncanny.

Ever the gentleman, he opened the passenger door for me and offered me a hand, conscious of the fact that my high heels weren't too compatible with the solid layer of ice on the ground. Daintily, I accepted his hand and climbed up toward the passenger seat. Getting into his pickup wasn't easy in such a restrictive dress, but after a few seconds of delicate struggle, I managed to swing my legs into the truck without distressing my dress. Reaching into my hand-me-down black purse, I set my phone to 'silent'. Tonight was about Clark and me. He would have my complete attention and devotion.

We were both silent for most of the drive, sharing glances every now and then, until we arrived at 'the stoplight.' It was one of those red lights that made absolutely no sense: where the tiny, oft-barren cross street always seemed to be stuck on green. No cars had even arrived at the cross street to set the light off. Meanwhile, folks in the

express lane like us were forced to stare at the infuriating red stoplight, which peered down at us in jest.

“You have no idea how beautiful you are, do you?” Clark turned to me and blurted, while we idled at the red light.

Unsure of how to answer that question, I simply shrugged. Ever since the change, people had been telling me that...and I wasn't blind. I knew I was pretty. Sometimes I didn't feel like I was, though...especially when Tina was calling me a freak and whatnot. Unhelpful adults would sometimes refer to those remarks as 'just words,' but that didn't seem to be the case. As much as I tried to deny it, those insults had a real impact on me. They planted seeds of doubt in my mind: that maybe she was right. Maybe I was a freak.

I hadn't stopped to consider it before, but my self-worth had always been fairly low. Back when I was Joseph, I think that I knew I was a sack of shit. I knew that nobody liked me. My confidence had risen since then, and now I had actual physical friends to uplift me, but I still berated myself far too much. I quickly checked my makeup in the mirror, before putting a smile on my face. Confidence, Johanna. Confidence.

“Why don't you use your whiteboard as much anymore?” Clark continued the conversation as the light turned green and we continued toward the restaurant.

I answered him by reaching over and pressing a small hand against his chest. With a loving smile, I turned to stare at his profile.

“Because I understand you?” He asked with a chuckle.

I nodded one time, still staring at his handsome face. He knew. I had no idea how he did it, but he knew exactly what I meant. The whiteboard was a hassle, and it was far easier to communicate nonverbally with someone like Clark.

“Alrighty then,” Clark declared as we pulled up to the fancy Norwegian restaurant. “Here we are.”

The restaurant was both gorgeous and warm. The ceiling designed to emulate a whale's bones, encapsulating the room and giving it a cozy vibe. My parents had given me a small amount of money to pay for my half of the date, but I honestly wasn't sure if it would suffice. This place was fancier than I'd anticipated.

“Table for two, please. We have reservations under ‘Clark Nordquist.’” Clark smiled to the pretty hostess, and I felt a small pang of envy. Had he been glancing at her boobs? I mean, they were bigger than mine...

I closed my eyes. No, Johanna. Don't be like that, I told myself. I was going to treat others well. Positive thoughts, Johanna. Positive thoughts.

Once we were seated, I scanned through the menu. Tuning out the college-aged waitress listing off specials for us, my eyes went wide with horror. The cheapest entree was \$35...seriously? My parents had only given me \$30. Shit.

“So, what are you thinking about getting?” Clark asked, enamoured with his own menu. Even the menus were elegant, with gold embroidery around the edges. Surveying the room, I realized that everyone else in the restaurant was over 10 years older than us, and seemed to be far more sophisticated.

Clark looked up from his menu and likely caught the look of desperation and worry on my face.

“Relax,” he ordered, extended a hand to grasp mine. “Relax,” he repeated. “It was my idea to come here. I’ll pay, don’t worry about it.”

He rubbed my hand and I gave an uneasy nod. I wasn’t thrilled at the prospect of Clark paying for my meal, but my stomach was rumbling like an angry thunderstorm. With that, I pointed to some kind of fish on the menu that I hadn’t heard of before, and showed it to Clark. To be frank, I chose it because it was both the cheapest entree and because it seemed like it would be a good amount of food. That probably wasn’t how I was supposed to decide in such a fancy establishment, but I’d never been one to play by all of the rules.

Lighting the candle at the center of our table, the waitress gave us a parting grin and headed back toward the kitchen.

“Ever since I first saw you, I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind,” Clark remarked out of the blue, still rubbing my hand.

I blushed lightly. He didn’t need to do or say any of this. He’d already won my heart...but he persisted nevertheless. He knew just what to say to make me warm inside.

“You told me that you were practicing sign language, and...I mean...do you know anyone else who speaks sign language? That’s what it’s called, right? Speaking?” Clark grew less and less certain of himself as one question unfolded into the next.

To answer all three of the questions, I simply gave a shrug. I didn’t know anyone who knew sign language, and I wasn’t sure if it was called ‘speaking.’ I think it was supposed to be called ‘signing’, but I didn’t correct Clark. I didn’t want to be a know-it-all, when I wasn’t entirely certain.

“Yeah, I don’t know either. We can look that one up,” Clark took a breath before continuing. “Anyways, I decided to start learning it myself. You know, so it could be our own thing. Our ‘secret’ language.” He concluded with his charming grin, as he

started to sign some words. Are you having fun? he asked with a few movements of his hands.

It took me a moment to process all of this, and - when I eventually did - my heart leapt. I opened and closed my mouth a few times in disbelief, contemplating what to say. I settled on a sign-language response: I love you.

“What’s that? Sorry, my vocabulary is still pretty bad.”

Tilting my head, I mouthed the words with a light giggle: I love you.

“Oh.” It was his turn to blush.

\* \* \*

The meal was interesting, although underwhelmingly small. You’d think that a \$35 entree would be filling, but it wasn’t. Apparently the ‘fish’ that I’d ordered was more of a minnow, and the collective amount of food on my plate was smaller than the size of my petite fist. The presentation was nice, I suppose, and the taste wasn’t bad, but who in their right mind would consider that to be a meal? Maybe it was the Midwesterner in me, but I couldn’t fight off my disappointment. Hell, I’d have to eat a whole entire meal after that one, just to appease my stomach. Freaking Norwegians and their fancy crap.

Graciously, Clark paid for the whole dinner. I bit my lip as he did, wishing that I’d brought enough money to pay for myself. I’d noticed that the waitress had been giving me side-glances and watching me closely. I wasn’t sure why, but boiled it down to two possibilities: either she was checking me out, or she was wondering why Clark ordered everything for me while I’d never uttered a word. Those were the two reactions I’d grown used to receiving. I suppose oddities intrigued people, and I was certainly an oddity.

The ride home was far more relaxed, as we held hands and sat in silence. It wasn’t an awkward silence or a tense one, but rather the unique warm silence that I could only share with Clark. Well...maybe it wasn’t completely silent. Clark blasted some of his favorite rock music as he enjoyed, which I kind’ve enjoyed. He even caught me trying to sing along to a couple of the more classic songs.

We stopped outside of my house, and Clark walked me to the door. Interestingly, there were no cars in our driveway and the lights were off, although I wasn’t aware of my parents having any plans for the night...maybe they wanted Clark and I to have the house. I guess it was possible, although that wouldn’t be very characteristic of my parents.

Tenderly, Clark reached down and wrapped his arms around my waist. He planted his lips on mine and gave me the tenderest of kisses, working his tongue into my mouth and pressing his body against mine. Wearing heels, it was so much easier to reach his face and kiss. I loved it. I secretly wished that I was this tall without heels, like Megan. After our lips eventually parted, I opened the door and beckoned for him to follow me inside, my heart racing as I did.

Taking my hand, Clark followed me inside and up the stairs to my room. Once safely inside my humble abode, I locked the door, kicked off my heels, and flung my purse onto my bed. With a predatory smile, I pounced on Clark and drove him down onto my bed. Okay, I didn't actually drive him down onto my bed...I lightly pushed him in that direction and he followed my lead.

Laying on top of him, I brushed my flowing raven hair to the side and continued our make-out session, pressing my soft lips against his and silently moaning with delight. It felt as if my whole body was on fire, and I wanted it to last forever. Unbuttoning his dress-shirt, I got my first opportunity to see his hard abs and muscular pecs. I'd touched them before, but not like this. My lips still locked with his, I ran a delicate hand along his torso. Rubbing his chest, I giggled when his light chest hairs passed through my fingers.

Without warning, his hands grasped my butt and pulled me down on top of him, pressing my breasts against his bare chest. I couldn't wear a bra with this dress, so the sensation was unreal. I squealed with delight and ended our kiss, bringing up a finger to softly trace his lips, which were now coated with a light layer of my lipstick. How far were we going to go? I licked my red lips with anticipation.

"What's that sound?" He asked, putting an abrupt end to our vibe and rhythm.

I raised an eyebrow and tilted my head. I hadn't heard any sound. Was he trying to get out of this situation? He did not love me? Was I pushing him into this too quickly? I gulped with panic, before I heard a slight vibrating sound. Oh shit, it was my phone. I should've completely turned that thing off.

Impatiently, I rolled off of Clark to pull my phone out of my purse. I was alarmed to see that I had 30 missed calls and over a dozen unread texts.

Fuck, I mouthed, the dreamy grin disappearing from my face. Scrolling through my texts, my stomach knotted itself in my throat. Shit. Shit shit shit. As I read, my lower jaw began trembling and tears welled in my eyes.

"What's wrong?" Clark asked, rolling over and softly massaging my shoulders as he read my texts with me. "Your grandmother?" He asked in a calming, sympathetic tone.

I nodded my head, still fighting off tears, as he drew me close in a hug.



My grandmother had died. Instead of sitting beside her in the hospital bed, I had chosen to spend my time making out with a boy. It was too late to even head to the hospital. She was gone, and my family was already coming home. I'd completely missed her death...caught up in my own pleasures.

With that thought, I let my tears run free. They scampered down my cheeks, running my mascara all over my face, as well as Clark's neck and chest. As I cried, he pushed the hair out of my eyes and whispered tranquil words in my ear, but I was too distant to pay attention to his exact words.

I loved my grandmother. Admittedly, I hadn't spent as much time with her as grandpa, but I still vividly remembered all of the silly stories she'd told me that Sunday. How could she be gone? She seemed so together, so...so...alive. My tears were rejuvenated and I bawled even harder. She was actually gone.

\* \* \*

Clark and I sat side-by-side on a couch in the living room, mascara smeared down from my eyes. His arm was wrapped around my bare shoulder, as we waited for my family to return from the hospital. Clark had put his shirt back on and I still wore my blue dress, my legs tucked beneath me. I didn't want my parents to think that anything had happened between the two of us in their absence, so I removed all traces of the fact that we'd been alone in my room. More than anything else, I felt shame and regret. How could I be so selfish? So stupid?

After a few minutes of silence, the door slowly swung open and my three closest family-members returned to their home. All of their faces were stricken with sorrow, and I suppose my own continence likely mirrored theirs.

Rising from the couch, I embraced my family in a tight group hug. I had become accustomed to being smallest member of the family, and readily nuzzled my face into Megan's neck as we all embraced.

When our hug came to an end, everyone seemed to notice that Clark was sitting on the couch. My parents hadn't met him yet, and these certainly weren't the best of circumstances. My heart sunk with worry as Dad walked over to Clark and gave him a once-over. He was protective of his daughters, after all.

"Thank you for taking care of her," Dad gave him a slight nod, and a wave of relief passed over me.

"Absolutely. I'm so sorry for your loss." Clark replied, taking that as his queue to leave. He gave me a quick hug before hurrying out the door.

As soon as he left the house, everything seemed slightly darker...sadder. Once more, I broke down in tears and collapsed to the couch.

“Sweetie,” Mom sat beside me and brushed her hand through my hair. “The doctor said that...” she stopped to fight off her own tears, “that it was a quick and painless stroke.” She kept stroking my hair, as I whimpered and buried my head into one of the couch’s uncomfortably embroidered pillows.

# CHAPTER 19

## *Slice*

Cheerleading practice was a godsend, a needed distraction from infuriating reality. I poured my heart into every cheer, and temporarily converted my anger into passion. I was getting better with each of my movements, but I still had a long way to go. I'd improve, though. I always did.

At the end of practice, fueled by my grief, I made my first attempt at performing a flip. Not all of the girls on the team did flips, but Sarah did and I watched her carefully, trying to copy her. I didn't announce to anyone that I was about to perform a flip, I simply...did it. The rest of the girls looked on as I sprinted down the gym floor and leapt into the air, holding my breath in fear. For a brief moment, in the middle of the air, a thought passed my mind: Why the hell was I doing this?

My flip wasn't pretty, but I landed on my two feet. That had to count for something, right? With a squeal, Megan came rushing over to me and gave me a tight hug.

"Oh my God, why did you do that? You could have hurt yourself!" Megan sighed and her expression shifted into an endearing smile. "Good job, though. You nailed it." Megan gazed down at me, and my cheeks reddened. I wasn't too embarrassed, though. She was my big sister and it warmed my heart to know that I'd made her happy. She had always been closer to Grandma than I had, and she certainly needed all the kindness and love I could muster. Even though Grandma was almost 80 years old, she'd always been in good health and her passing had been both sudden and unexpected. I suppose I was still processing it. I still didn't feel like myself, even after crying myself to sleep last night. I felt...different. As if I was flooded with too many emotions. Overwhelmed.

While I took my post-practice shower and changed into jeans and a soft sweater, my adrenaline faded and my mood began to turn noticeably sour. Another day of stupid school, and I had no interest in dealing with it. I briefly considered ditching for the day, but decided to suck it up and head to my first class. I wasn't some delicate flower, and it was going to take more than a death in the family to crush me. I'd tough it out.

As an afterthought, I pulled the miniature video camera out of my backpack and pinned it to my sweater. The little camera claimed to be HD, but it looked like a small button. I was fairly skeptical about the video quality, but it was better than nothing. The tiny lens was my last line of defence against the inevitable. Maybe I could record Jarvis being a monster and send it to some higher authority...maybe the FBI would do something about it. Probably not, but it was possible. Collecting evidence couldn't be a bad thing, could it?

Walking down the hall after practice, I was in an unusually grumpy mood, burning my anger like fuel. The mere thought of Jarvis was enough to make my blood boil. What if I ran into him in the hallway? I certainly wouldn't put up with his shit this time. I wasn't going to curl up and cry. That was part of why I chose to don the video camera. Deep down, I wanted a confrontation. I wanted to let my emotions fly.

Just as that thought passed through my mind, I recognized a tell-tale crowd of students gathered in the hall. They formed a ring around some sort of spectacle, and I knew what was happening immediately: either students were fighting, or a green alien had fallen from Mars and landed at Cheran High. I pushed past the other students, jostling my way toward the middle of the circle.

Of course, there were no green aliens to be found. Just Jarvis, the hulking bully who was my own damned creation. He stood towering over a stereotypically nerdy-looking student, smirking as he crushed the poor guy's glasses and stamped them into the floor. The kid looked sad and alone, as if the world had abandoned him. A bruise was already forming over his right eye, and his curly blonde hair was matted with sweat and stained with a small splatter of blood. I thought that I recognized him, but we'd never actually met before. Cheran was a big school, after all, and the boy looked like a freshman. Still, I felt a connection with the downtrodden boy. I knew what it was like to feel helpless against Jarvis, as if the world was stacked in the brute's favor.

Jarvis' vile girlfriend Tina stood by his side, egging him on. Other students and even a couple teachers were watching from the circle, but none of them moved to stop Jarvis. They weren't indifferent to his actions, with pained expressions on their faces. They were just afraid...all because of his stupid wish. Fuck that.

As Jarvis' fist once more collided with the unfortunate boy's face and sent spit flying from his mouth, I realized something: this was a snapshot of the future. Even if Jarvis decided to leave me alone, even if he got bored of tormenting me...he would simply find someone to destroy. The kid, fumbling around for his broken glasses and begging for mercy, probably did absolutely nothing to justify Jarvis' hatred. Jarvis beat him up because he wanted to, and nothing would ever change that desire. If nobody stopped him, Jarvis would go on to destroy the lives of countless others. He would bully, assault, and possibly kill innocent people, while all others looked on in fear. He'd live in his immunity bubble for the rest of his life, ruining the world for those around him. No. I couldn't let that happen.

With a breath of determination, I walked between Jarvis and the beaten freshman. The circular crowd watched with hushed silence. Looking up at Jarvis' mammoth figure, I clenched my jaw. He was probably over 100 lbs heavier than me and a head taller, and I had absolutely no battle plan. Video games taught me one valuable thing in life: if it initially looks like your team is going to lose, your team is probably going to lose. As I looked up at his growling face, that lesson was not lost upon me. Despite my best efforts to act intimidating, the anger in my heart was joined by a healthy mix of fear. What the hell was I getting myself into?

"You," Jarvis sneered. "You're the reason Dad took away my Xbox." His face twisted into a scowl, to match mine. Well, at least that meant his parents actually punished him for ambushing me and trying to freeze me to death. I guess Mom's efforts weren't all in vain. An Xbox taken away, though? Really? That was their idea of punishment? That's how spoiled he was? I shook my head in disappointment. Even if his parents had applied a more serious punishment, Jarvis wasn't one to learn lessons from consequences. I saw it when I looked up into his eyes: he had no potential for neither compassion nor contrition.

Clenching my jaw, I prepared a punch. If I never stood up to him, he would never stop...plus, I wasn't in the mood to put up with his snarky face. Balling my hand into a tight fist, I lunged toward the monster. I wasn't fast enough. In the blink of an eye, Jarvis charged me, tackling me to the ground. When I hit the cold, hard floor, the breath was knocked out of me and a chorus of gasps rose from the onlookers.

I wheezed for a few seconds, struggling for breath. Unfortunately, Tina took the window of opportunity to kneel on top of my chest. Jesus, she was a lot bigger than me. Her knees pressed into my body while she punched me rhythmically in the stomach. The punches weren't hard, but they were enough to make me whimper

silently, tears forming in my eyes. While she held me in place on the ground, Jarvis produced a pair of scissors.

My eyes went wide with terror as he handed the shiny metal scissors to Tina. What the hell were they planning to do? I squirmed around and started hitting Tina's side with desperate blows, but my escape efforts were futile. Jarvis knelt down beside Tina and held my writhing arms in place more securely than a straight jacket. With a sinister grin, Tina leaned forward and grabbed a handful of my long, flowing black hair.

"No!" I attempted to shout, desperately trying to roll free of her grasp. I was helpless. All of my previous anger and bravery had dwindled into a combination of despair and sheer fear. The scissors looked so sharp...

"Looks like you're due for a makeover," she laughed.

Snip, snip, snip. Tina worked the scissors, slicing and dicing through my hair like a scythe. Tears curved down my face. Every second or two, another lock of my raven hair drifted down into a growing pile, framing my head like a halo. I closed my eyes and continued whimpering. Why was she doing this to me? Why me? Why me?

Jarvis let my arms loose, but Tina continued her handiwork. I considered trying to grab the scissors from her hands and escaping, but it was pointless. If I tried to escape, it would only encourage them. Also, with the scissors so close to my face, any sudden movement could have seriously injured me. The worst part was the fact that dozens of students and teachers were standing mere feet away, yet they showed no intention of helping me. It was like something out of a dream. A nightmare, rather. Their eyes were all wide with pity and fear, as if they were each weighing the consequences for intervening and ruling against it. Even the boy who I had saved was nowhere to be seen. He probably ran off as soon as he could.

I lay motionless when Jarvis picked up my backpack and poured the books out onto my head. I gasped in alarm when my gigantic math book came tumbling out and smacked me on the upper cheek. My cheek stung sharply, and I drew a wincing breath.

After the book bag was empty, Jarvis gripped both sides of my sparkling blue backpack and attempted to rip it in half. Luckily, he only managed to put a sizeable hole in the bottom. Still, I felt a pang of sorrow. I liked that backpack. It was one of the first really girly things that I'd ever purchased, and I felt an odd sense of attachment to it.

The electronic school bell rang like the last note of a tragic ballad, and I closed my eyes, praying that my two tormentors would let me go. As the bell rang, Jarvis dropped my bag onto the floor beside me, like a predator tossing out its victim's meatless bones.

“Perfect,” Tina said with a grin, displaying her glinting white teeth. Finished with her cutting, she raised her hand and slapped me in the side of the cheek. She did it playfully, as if she was taunting me. I flinched anyway.

“Pussy,” she smirked, a chuckle growling in her throat. With a sniff of superiority, she removed her knee from my chest and rose to her feet. I panted for breath.

“I did good, didn’t I?” Jarvis asked with a wide grin, as the disgusting couple shared an awkward embrace.

“Yeah. Real good,” she gave Jarvis a gross, sloppy kiss. If I could scrub that kiss from memory, I would do so in a heartbeat. Wiping saliva off her mouth, Tina turned her eyes to me. “That bitch learned her place.”

With that last remark, the two human piles of trash merged into the crowd of marching students, heading to their first class of the day.

I lay silently on the ground, not moving an inch. Two thoughts plagued my mind: First, I was an idiot. Second, I needed a better plan...or a stroke of incredible luck. Those were my only options. I could never avoid those two assholes, and they were out for blood. By standing up to Jarvis, I’d made myself the biggest target imaginable. My days were numbered.

Slowly, I raised my hands to feel my devastated hair.

Goosebumps ran up my arms, and my teeth chattered together uncontrollably. Why did I think I could take on both of them? In what world was that a good idea?

\* \* \*

As soon as he saw me, Clark knew something was wrong. I had spent a few minutes in the bathroom carefully re-applying my makeup, but that made little difference. I couldn’t hide my hair, which was cut raggedly and barely reached the bottom of my neck. I’d definitely need another haircut to even it out. Previously, my long, soft locks had meandered all the way down to the small of my back. Having shorter hair felt...weird. I’d grown so used to long hair that I expected my hair to tickle my back when I walked. Of course, that was no longer the case. Along with my hair, I couldn’t disguise my shattered morale, nor my growing fear. They were both etched into my face.

Clark didn’t ask me what was wrong, instead choosing to stare into my eyes and hold my hand, when I took a seat beside him at our regular lunch spot. Caroline, Olivia, Brandon, and a few mutual friends sat nearby, but they might as well have been nonexistent. My attention was fixed on Clark. He was concerned about me, and I felt

guilty. I'd almost gotten myself seriously hurt...he'd never be able to forgive himself if something truly horrible happened to me. Why did I have to go out of my way to put myself into danger? Why was I so stupid?

"I heard about...what happened," he wrapped an arm around me and pulled me close to his chest. I suppose word traveled fast at Cheran, and he already knew of my run-in with the two banes of my existence. "You're the strongest person I've ever met, going through all of these terrible things, one after another. Stay strong. I won't ever let them hurt you again."

I fought off the urge to roll my eyes at his white-knight attempt. On face surface, it was cheesy and annoying that he assumed I couldn't fend for myself. To some extent, though, he was right. I couldn't defend myself against Jarvis and Tina, but neither could he. Sure, he'd be able to beat up Jarvis but - if he did - the Duncan family would stop at nothing to destroy Clark's life. Jarvis was growing more and more brazen with each passing day, and although Clark's words were intended to be comforting, they were deeply unsettling. I couldn't let Clark defend me. That wouldn't end well.

The mere thought of Clark being put in jeopardy brought a tear to my eyes, which caused Clark to raise my head with a strong hand and give me a light peck on the cheek. This was all my fault. If I hadn't tried to fight Jarvis a couple weeks ago, and if I hadn't been a loud-mouth, he wouldn't have pushed me through that wall. He wouldn't have found that stone. If he hadn't found that stone, my life wouldn't be in danger...nor would Clark's.

"I'd do anything for you. If he touches you again, I'll put him in the hospital." Clark uttered the words at just above a whisper, but they carried tremendous weight.

Staring at him in disbelief, I slowly shook my head and cupped a hand against his cheek. Had he actually said that? Was he actually willing to take on Jarvis? In all of my life as Johanna, he was the first person who didn't seem to fear the mere thought of Jarvis Duncan. His words were heroic, but they were also beyond foolish.

My hand shook as I wrote a single word on my whiteboard: Don't.

\* \* \*

I snuck in a shower before afternoon cheerleading practice in an attempt to clean the stray bits of loose hair out of my shorter locks, and my efforts seemed to be somewhat successful. It was a bit nerve-wracking to stand naked in a giant shower, all by myself. I kept fearfully glancing toward the locker room door, as if I was



anticipating that Tina would walk in and...and...I shuddered. I had no idea what she or Jarvis would do to me next.

Throughout the rest of the school day, I dutifully avoided Tina and Jarvis - the two skidmarks on humanity. Once more, Clark and I managed to offer a steadfast defence for our good ole friend Genghis Khan. After the trial, I slipped through the halls like a ghost, walking quickly and avoiding busy walkways. I couldn't live my life like this, I thought to myself as I threw on my cheerleading uniform and sized myself up in the mirror. Carefully, I plucked the small camera off of my blouse and threw it into a secure pouch in my ripped backpack. The camera had been running on 'Record' mode for hours, on the off chance that the two jerks ambushed me again. Of course, they hadn't, and now the camera had almost certainly run out of recording space...not like any of that mattered, though. A few recordings couldn't save me from Jarvis' wrath, could they?

Cheerleading practice was again a distraction, this time from fear rather than grief. The whole practice had a solemn tone to it. None of the other cheerleaders were particularly surprised when I showed up with my uneven, short haircut. They didn't ask me about it, either. They all knew about what had happened.

When our afternoon practices began, I almost forgot about the fact that two basketball teams were drilling less than a few feet away. From time to time, I would catch members of the boys' team sneaking glances at us, only to be chided by their coaches. I suppose it made some sense for them to practice in close proximity to the cheer team. We would be on the sidelines for most of their games, and they needed to learn how to play basketball without getting distracted by every pretty face with a pompom. That's all we were to some people, but I knew that we were much more than mere good-looking distractions.

Although we cheered at sporting events, that was only the tip of the iceberg for our squad. It definitely wasn't the reason we drove ourselves so hard. Instead, we were focusing our efforts on the statewide Minnesota cheer league, which held a Championship tournament every May. We would be rated on our routines, and - based on what the other girls had told me - the tournament wasn't lovey dovey. It was a legitimate sport, with rivalries and high stakes. We were athletes, and the Championship was our competition. I had to be prepared.

I nailed almost every routine, and went through the whole practice without thinking about Jarvis and Tina. For a brief stretch of minutes, I forgot about their existence entirely. It was utter bliss. Of course, that sensation was short-lived.

When practice came to an end, Megan came up to my afterward and gave me a long, snug hug.

“Good job, sis,” she whispered in my ear. “Just...just know that I’m always here for you. Okay?”

I gave her a slight smile and nodded.

“I’m going to talk to Mom and see if we can do anything about Jarvis.”

No, I tried to interrupt, shaking my head desperately. Please. Don’t.

“This is getting serious, Johanna. You could get really hurt! You don’t want to be on the Duncan’s bad side. I’m sure that we can work something out,” she pleaded.

Bitterly, I shook my head. Megan had already made up her mind: she was going to tell Mom about today’s Jarvis encounter, despite my protests. However, it would have been hard for me to cover up his and Tina’s abuse. After all, a foot and a half of my hair had been sliced off. Mom was bound to notice that.

As we met for our final huddle, many of the other girls shared caring smiles and reassuring pats with me. I’d only been a cheerleader for a couple days, but I already felt like I was part of the team. They didn’t seem to be too bothered by the fact that I didn’t actually contribute on the whole ‘cheering’ front. Perhaps even more importantly, none of them treated me with pity. They encouraged me. They never hesitated to correct me. Expectations for me were high. I had a feeling that Megan had told them to go hard on me, and I was beyond thankful for that. I didn’t want to be treated like a freak or pitied like a charity case. I just wanted others to treat me like a normal person. And that’s exactly what the cheer team did. I loved them for it.

Media often portrays cheerleaders as gossip girls who stand around and talk about boys all the time, and seldom actually exert themselves physically, beyond the occasional pyramid formation. That couldn’t have been further from the truth. Every practice was taxing and strenuous, pushing all of us to our absolute limits. By the time we were ready to hit the showers, we were always red-faced and panting.

“Little Larsen!” Coach Wendt summoned me after practice came to a close. ‘Little Larsen.’ That had become her nickname for me, but I didn’t mind too much. At least she wasn’t calling me ‘Megan’s sister’ anymore. I jogged over to Coach, my sneakers squeaking on our small slice of the basketball court.

“What the hell did you do to your hair?” She shook her head in dismay. “Kids these days,” I heard her mutter under her breath. Raising her tone, she lowered her eyes away from me. I suppose she wasn’t quite as ‘in the know’ as the rest of the cheer team.

“You aren’t flopping around like a fish anymore. Good job.” She scribbled on her notepad while she spoke. If she had chosen to look up, she would have seen that I was positively beaming. My day had been terrible, but she reversed all of that with two simple words. Coach never gave compliments. She was the strong, stoic type who rarely showed emotion. I could see in her eyes that there was more to her, though. This was all a front, of sorts. She created these nicknames for me, as if she was pretending that she didn’t know my real name. It was her way of feigning apathy. Of course, I knew that she really did care about every member of the team on a personal level, myself included. She loved us like daughters.

Thanks, I mouthed, although I knew she wouldn’t see it.

\* \* \*

The drive home was beautifully quiet, marred only by the snow and ice crunching beneath Megan’s tires. Thankfully, Jarvis and Tina hadn’t been waiting for me after practice, which caused my mind to wander. Were they planning another attack? Did they ever plan attacks? Were they clever enough to orchestrate something like that? They weren’t the brightest two minds in the world, so it was possible that the concept of planning was lost upon them. Even so, I had a feeling that they were up to something bigger. I wasn’t sure exactly what Jarvis and Tina’s motivations were, but they seemed to get a thrill out of making my life as miserable as possible. Would they try to get me kicked out of school? I shuddered at the thought. A life without Clark and the rest of my friends was unimaginable.

What would happen if the douchebag duo confronted me when my new friends were around? Clark? Caroline? Sarah? Megan? Would they stick up for me and put themselves at risk? Clark already said that he would. A chill ran down my spine. I couldn’t let that happen. Ever.

My dark thoughts were thankfully interrupted when we pulled into our driveway. Both of us scampered inside the house, as quickly as possible. It wasn’t snowing at the moment, but it was chillingly cold. Sometimes, I wondered what it would be like to live somewhere else. A place far away from Minnesota, where it never snowed. No...I liked the snow too much for that. St. Paul, despite its drawbacks, was my home.

As soon as we were inside the house, Mom ambushed me. Megan, seeing this, sent me a sympathetic grin and then headed over to her room, mumbling something about how much homework she had to do. Just like that, I was cornered.

"Jarvis did this to you?" Mom asked, eyebrows furrowed as she studied my hair. Perhaps 'asked' wasn't the correct word for her tone. It definitely wasn't a question. Mom knew that Jarvis was responsible.

With a sigh, I nodded. His girlfriend, too, I admitted.

"His friend?" she said uncertainly, unsure if she'd interpreted my words correctly.

Girlfriend, I repeated, with more emphasis on 'girl'.

"Girlfriend?" Mom asked.

I nodded, a bit frustrated at the communication difficulty.

"And what's her name?"

I sighed and almost rolled my eyes. Pulling out my phone, I opened a note app and wrote down the name of my harasser: Tina Lawski.

"Well, Tina's parents are going to hear about this. So are the Duncan boy's." Mom's voice was marked with conviction. Taking a step closer to me, she inspected my reddened, tender cheek.

"Did they hit you?"

I sighed once more, and nodded. There was no point in lying to Mom. She would figure out all of this regardless.

Mom's eyes glinted with fury. Oh no...Mom was already stressed and emotionally strained from Grandma's death. She didn't need this on her plate. Suddenly, I felt a bit guilty about informing her of my issues. Guilty and nervous. What if she said something that she would regret to the Duncan family?

Wait! I typed rapidly in my phone. I'll talk to Jarvis and Tina about it, myself. We'll work something out. You don't need to get involved.

I handed her my phone, and she narrowed her eyes. "Are you sure?" she asked, uneasily. "You aren't just saying that to get me off your case?"

On the one hand, she would be proud of me if I tackled an issue like this by myself. On the other hand, there was precisely zero chance that I would be able to reason with Jarvis and Tina. This was merely a temporary suggestion, just to keep Mom from stirring my bullies into action. I had no intention of pleading with them.

I nodded eagerly, and I felt a small pang of guilt. I lied to her, and it didn't feel good...but what other option did I have? Jarvis had already sought retribution on me once before, and another Xbox grounding would certainly yield even more vengeance.

She paused and brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "Okay." She nodded slowly, in contemplation. "I'm proud of you. You're much more resilient than I was at your age."

Thanks, Mom I mouthed as she embraced me into a hug. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling of guilt. Darnit, why did I have to lie to her?

“Alright, let’s get your upstairs so we can fix up your hair. You’ve still got a decent amount of hair, so I think a pixie cut might be the best option.”

Okay, I agreed. I knew very little about women’s hair-styles, so I was comfortable deferring to Mom’s judgment.

\* \* \*

“There you are,” Mom smiled at me through the mirror. It was a pained smile, painted atop a mountain of grief.

Thanks, Mom, I mouthed once more. Turning my head back and forth, I studied my new haircut in the mirror. My raven-black hair didn’t even reach down to my mid-neck. Instead, it was cut at a curve, sweeping to the left. The back of my hair was noticeably shorter than the front, but I suppose that was the style. The length was a bit boyish due to the short length, but I was quite clearly a girl. My hair’s stylization, somewhat pouty lips, and delicate facial structure confirmed as much.

All in all, the haircut was okay. Aesthetically, I preferred my previous long hairstyle. Longer hair looked better on me. I suppose I could have used extensions and whatnot, but that seemed like a hassle. On the plus side, shorter hair would be better for cheerleading. I wouldn’t have to put my hair in a scrunchie for practice anymore, which was a minor plus.

Staring into the mirror, I made another observation: I no longer looked like a fun-sized version of Megan. My hair made me look distinct from her. For some reason, that made me feel a bit sad.

“Alright, dinner won’t make itself. Let’s go,” Mom herded me into the kitchen like a young lamb. Once more, I was recruited to help her cook dinner. I didn’t protest, as my head was swimming with an array of emotions, most of them fear-related. Maybe cooking could help take my mind off of those things. With a determined breath, I donned a baby blue apron and joined her.

We were just baking chicken tonight, along with some asparagus, and Mom didn’t really need my help. Nevertheless, I stayed by her side and aided her whenever she requested. As we cooked, there was a profound pain in her eyes which made my heart fall. Her mother had just died and - although it was somewhat of an inevitability, given the fleeting nature of life - it hurt her deeply. What if my Mom died? I’d be completely destroyed. I’d probably cry for a week straight and refuse to leave my room. Mom was so composed, so stoic. I wish I had that caliber of spirit, that sort of fortitude.

I had learned a great deal about cooking from Mom, and was aided by the fact that she would ramble as we worked. She told all sorts of stories and shared helpful cooking tips while we stirred, mixed and waited for timers. I felt as if I now had the necessary knowledge to cook a variety of dishes on my own. Once or twice, I'd even found myself thumbing through cookbooks while our dinner baked. This had become my newest hobby, and the task that I most looked forward to upon returning home from school. Cooking with Mom was always a cathartic experience.

After I pulled the chicken out of the oven and began cooling it, I wrapped my arms around her in a firm hug. God knew she needed it.

"We're reading the will tomorrow morning," she said, her voice struggling to maintain its level tone. "I want you to be there, sweetie."

I nodded, my head still buried in her lower neck. At least that meant I'd be able to avoid Jarvis and Tina for a while...

"I hope we don't get stuck taking care of her dogs," she attempted a weak chuckle, before falling into a slightly darker tone. "Remember what she always used to say? 'I want my dogs to outlive me.'"

I nodded again, tears welling in my eyes. She'd gotten the tiny dogs a couple years after grandpa passed away, and they had an absurd life expectancy, probably over 20 years. I used to hate those pesky, furry shits. Not anymore, though. Like them, my voice had been taken away against my will...I suppose I sympathized with them now. Sure, they yipped and barked too much back in the day, but I had abused my vocal ability just as much as them. I'd been a massive jerk to people, and never listened to their words. I had never realized that people actually loved me. That my family actually cared about me.

With bleak smiles, we finished cooking dinner and I dutifully set the table. Dinner was an exceptionally quiet affair. At the height of the silence, Dad complimented my haircut and cluelessly asked me why I decided upon a shorter length. I guess I couldn't blame him, though. How could he have possibly known that this short haircut was forced upon me? Needless to say, his comment wasn't an excellent conversation-starter.

Dad was just as sullen about Grandma's death as the rest of us. She was like a second mother to him. His own parents were still alive, but they had moved to Florida a couple decades ago. I'd only met them four or five times, when they came to visit back when I was Joseph. My mother's family and Dad's had always been close, as they grew up together in St. Paul. That close-knit relationship was displayed for all to see on Dad's crestfallen face.

The chicken was delicious, but neither it nor Dad's oblivious comment accounted for the silence, which hung over our heads like heavy clouds. Grandma's passing had left its mark on us.

There was a terrible irony to the whole situation. Grandma lived her whole life trying to inconvenience us as little as possible. She never pestered us for rides or favors because she didn't want to be a nuisance. Now, her passing had left us feeling collectively miserable...she would have hated to evoke such emotions from us. If she was somewhere up there in heaven, she'd be looking down in disappointment and guilt. She'd be angry that she caused us any sort of suffering, even in death.

That line of thinking gave me a burst of renewed spirit. I had to do my best to act cheerful and normal. That would please Grandma and her legacy.

Standing up from the table, I flashed my parents a quick, reassuring smile. I didn't want them worrying about me.

I headed up to my room and fussed over tomorrow's clothing selection, sifting through my closet until I found a pleasing outfit. Whistling silently to myself, I proceeded to change into my pink and white pajamas. With that taken care of, I decided to play some Battlefield. My new favorite part about playing online games was the fact that nobody had to know that I was a mute girl. Aside from my California friends, people just saw me as 'Badger.' I could have been anybody in the world.

Of course, that luxury was short-lived, as Shadow quickly informed the enemy team that they were losing to a girl. After that, chat was filled with a handful of crass comments, all directed at me.

Thanks, Shadow, I typed angrily, rolling my eyes. Why did he have to go and do that? Whatever...I couldn't let it bother me.

As I hid the chat window and refocused on the game, I couldn't help but wonder what motivated people to say things like 'show me your tits' and 'send nudes' to a complete stranger. Was it the anonymity that the internet offered? Was this the only interaction they ever had with a female and they didn't know how to behave? I'd certainly never acted like that back when I was Joseph. I mean, I hadn't been very chivalrous or anything, but I also hadn't been such a colossal douche...had I?

The rude comments reminded me of Jarvis, and the way he treated me. Most guys weren't like that, were they? I winced, reliving the day's earlier events. I was such an idiot. Why did I go hunting for him like that? Why'd I try to play heroine?

Shaking my head, I announced my departure and disconnected from the game. Thoughts of Jarvis had killed my gaming mood.

There were a few silver linings from my moment of bravery, earlier in the day. At least I'd recorded the incident with my video camera. Maybe I could send it to the Feds, and they would punish him...probably not, but it was possible. Nervously biting my lip, I pulled the miniscule spy camera out of my bag and hooked it up to my computer. For some reason, perhaps out of morbid curiosity, I felt compelled to watch the video. There was over an hour of footage, so I skipped through the boring and embarrassing minutes of me trying to figure out whether or not the camera was online. There I was, a naive girl in a blouse and skirt, trying to get her camera to function. I fast-forwarded through the tape until I arrived at the initial encounter with Jarvis. I shook my head in silence. What was wrong with me? Why'd I have to make myself an even bigger target?

The video showed everything: Jarvis tackling me to the ground violently, Tina pinning me in place and scissoring through my hair while Jarvis ripped up my backpack. When I closed the video, I'd already begun to feel nauseous, the smell of Tina's hot breath still in my nostrils. My eyes began to teem with tears and I gagged involuntarily. Dashing over to the toilet, I fell to my knees on the hard tile. Sitting over the still bowl, I continued gagging and let the saliva drip out of my mouth as I struggled to keep my swooping black hair out of my face. Growing up, I had only ever puked when I was ill, but I suppose there was a first time for everything. After a minute or two of gagging, the nausea intensified and I let loose a few waves of vomit, leaving my delicious dinner on the inside the waiting toilet bowl.

Despite my mystical mutism, I must have made at least some amount of sound. It wasn't long before I heard a few knocks on my bathroom door, followed promptly by Megan's comforting hand on my shoulder.

"Are you okay?" She asked cautiously, grabbing my short hair and brushing it back while I unleashed another round of vomit. After another few minutes, I was convinced that I had nothing left in my stomach. Slowly, I turned around to look Megan in the eyes.

"Are you sick?" She inquired with a grimace, as I knelt shaking on the bathroom floor.

I shook my head. No. I wasn't sick. I was terrified.



# CHAPTER 20

## *Willpower*

**W**ell over a dozen of us sat in tense anticipation, all crammed into the modest lawyer's office. The office itself was minimalist, with hardwood floors and white walls. The walls were unbroken except for two proud, immaculately framed diplomas hanging above a handsome oak desk. On the desk sat an ostentatious golden placard reading James Wilcox, J.D. A collective silence hung over us, thin enough to be sliced by the softest of whispers.

Almost all of the family's adults were present and even Uncle Gene had flown in from Florida. For the most part, our family was close-knit. We cared about each other more than inheritance from Grandma. The green stretch of greed didn't seem to linger in the air. Personally, I didn't give a shit about the money. Megan and I were only there because Mom had requested our presence. I loved Grandma, and I was comforted to see that our family wasn't yet fighting over her possessions like stray dogs over a ham shank. Hopefully that would continue to be true, and the whole ordeal would be quick, simple, and relatively painless.

I smoothed a ripple in the thin cobalt-blue skirt which clung tightly to my thighs, and instinctively crossed my legs. Tapping my long fingernails along the cherry oak chair, I made brief eye contact with Megan beside me. Staring into her icy eyes, and we shared a moment of understanding. We were both ancy in the crowded room, and wanted the proceedings to go as quickly as possible.

Fortunately, our desires were met when the portly, mustachioed lawyer waddled into the room. Wilcox was a short man with broad, black-rimmed glasses and an overflowing briefcase in his arms. He clutched the briefcase tight against his chest, as if it was filled with wishing stones.

“Apologies, apologies. My deepest apologies,” Wilcox winced as he squeezed through our small crowd and arrived at his desk. He’d told us that his office would be unlocked, and we had all assumed that he would be waiting for us inside. We were clearly mistaken.

“People have no idea how to drive on ice these days, do they? There were accidents all over the place.” He threw out the half-hearted excuse with full sincerity, although nobody in the room was convinced. We hadn’t witnessed the supposedly widespread car accidents to which he referred.

“Alright,” he managed a cheery grin as he plopped down into the contoured black leather chair, which was far too large for him. He foraged through his unkempt briefcase before pulling out a thick document and readjusting his glasses.

“If there’s a will, there’s a way,” he said with a cackling laugh. He was the only person who found the joke to be amusing, as we all sat in stoic silence. Wilcox didn’t seem to notice, and still wore a glowing smile on his face as he squinted at Grandma’s will.

“Let us begin,” he coughed weakly, and wiped the smile from his face. “The last will and testament of Claudia Dorias. Ah, I see that she updated this will rather recently. Rest assured that this is the most accurate version of her wishes...”

After a few minutes, his voice became a dull drone, his cheeriness evaporating into the room’s muggy air. The will was written by Grandma herself, and unsurprisingly it meandered off-topic constantly. An entire page of the will was used to describe Grandma’s love for her two voiceless dogs. Before long, though, he reached the topic of inheritance, and peoples’ ears began to perk up.

To most of the family’s approval, Grandma left her chief assets - the house, and bond holdings - to be sold and have the proceeds split between each of her direct children, my father included. Nobody in the family was going to become a multi-millionaire, but we would all get tidy sums. She left her well-maintained white Cadillac to Uncle Steve, who would likely give it to his son Jake in an effort to curry favor. To Megan, she left her enviable jewelry collection, which caused a few of my aunts to scowl.

My eyes went wide when I heard my name. “To my dear granddaughter Johanna, I leave my wedding dress, because I know you will do it justice. I also leave my trusty spoon. You may find it particularly useful.”

I sat in mild shock. She updated her will for me? She cared about me that much? What on Earth?

She’d left me her wedding dress. The same gorgeous white dress that she wore in all of her grayscale wedding photos, with embedded pearls and intricate embroidery.

Despite all my willpower, my eyes began to brim with tears. Grandma cared about me more than I knew, and I barely spent any time with her. I could have come over whenever I wanted, as long as I had a ride, but I spent my time playing video games and doing jack-shit.

Wilcox looked up from the document and began rifling through his briefcase once more. Involuntarily snorting, he pulled out the old beaten spoon, ornate and regal despite its age, with deep engravings and a rustic rock on the lower handle.

“Claudia said that she didn’t trust herself to keep the aforementioned spoon safe and sound, and requested that I give this to you in person.” By the tone of finality in his voice, it seemed as if Grandma understood that her days were limited. Perhaps she hadn’t been feeling well, but didn’t want to bother us with her issues...that would be quite characteristic of her. My watery eyes produced true tears, which raced down my cheek and ruined my makeup. Damn it, I should’ve anticipated this. I cried easily and often these days, although I no longer considered it a negative trait. I was more honest with my emotions, if anything. Regardless, I made a mental note to buy cry-proof makeup.

Rising from my seat, I walked slowly on my four-inch heels and took the spoon from Wilcox. Around the spoon’s handle was a piece of paper, handwritten and wrapped tightly. Returning to my chair, I unraveled the note and read Grandma’s consistent, ornate cursive:

*My dear Granddaughter,*

*This is a spoon. I’m leaving it to you because of the way that your smile lights up the kitchen. Thank you very much for helping with the dessert. You remind me of the sunshine, which is just delightful. I could use some more sunshine, the weather has been awfully cold these days. I always used to tell your Grandfather that we should move South, but every time I did, he convinced me to stay. Anyways, back to the spoon. That spoon is one of my earliest childhood memories. My parents took it with them on their way out of Lithuania after the Soviets came into power. I still remember how they made me hide it inside of my teddy bear when we took the boat toward Sweden. They were afraid that the regime would catch us and seize the spoon. How silly. They treated it like it was gold, so I did the same. I hung onto that spoon for the next...I don’t know how many years. A long time, that’s for certain. Since Eisenhower was President, at least.*

*With love,*

*Claudia*

A curious smile spread across my lips, and I stuffed the spoon into my baby blue backpack. We were going straight to school after this, so I’d have to spend the whole day with the odd heirloom. I suppose there could be worse fates...maybe it would even

come in handy. I could swat Jarvis with the spoon in self-defence. I smiled weakly at the thought, suppressing my fears about Jarvis' next inevitable attack.

The rest of the will-reading passed like a shadow, and concluded with Grandma's request that we continue hosting family dinners because she didn't want us all to drift apart. Only seconds after finishing the reading, Wilcox put on a brimmed hat and scrambled out the door in the same manner as his arrival. He was a strange man, to say the least. I suppose Grandma didn't mind working with him, though. I suppose she was a bit odd, too. There was nothing wrong with being odd, was there?

\* \* \*

Megan and I both missed cheerleading practice, along with all but one of the day's classes. Our teachers would understand, though. Anything related to the death of a family member was treated with a degree of empathy. We all had family members, and everyone knew how difficult it was to deal with death.

Regardless, I didn't want to miss Geology, my favorite class. I raced down the slippery hallway, still wet from the snow-melt dragged in by a thousand trudging shoes. By the grace of God, I managed not to slip.

I was over thirty minutes late, and when I popped open the classroom door, I was greeted by a classroom full of staring faces. I didn't want to disturb class, and already felt guilty for making myself a spectacle. Trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, I dashed to my seat, my four-inch heels clicking rapidly against the floor. Somewhere between the door and my front-row desk, however, I tripped and was sent sprawling across the epoxy floor with an audible thump.

If every single student wasn't staring at me before, they were now. On the floor with scarlet cheeks, I tidied my fancy skirt and bounced to my feet. Why did I have to be so reckless in heels? Why did Mom even make me wear heels for the will reading? I cursed myself for my clumsiness, and took a seat beside Caroline. Twirling her blonde locks, she sent me an endearing grin, as if I was a stumbling fawn who'd just managed to stand back up. I rolled my eyes at her, and fixed the bracelets on my wrist.

"Ms. Larsen," Mr. Bradley sent me an amused grin, which only made me blush harder. "I'm glad to see that you're passionate about Geology. You didn't need to sprint, though. This isn't P.E." He walked over toward the door and stooped to pick something up.

“Does this belong to you?” He raised an eyebrow, holding the wooden heirloom spoon up to the light and re-adjusting his glasses. It must have fallen out of my ripped backpack when I fell...

I nodded uneasily, as he continued to inspect the spoon.

“Curious. Very curious,” his grin widened and he brought the spoon to me, laying it on my desk as if it were a ceremonial sword. Staring into my eyes, he continued: “In all my years, I never thought I’d see something like this.”

It was my turn to raise an eyebrow. What was he talking about? He was an atypical man, but had he finally stepped off the deep end?

Still staring at me, he lowered his voice to just above a whisper. “Johanna, this tiny gemstone...” he flipped the spoon and pointed to a simple brown rock on the handle, which I’d mistaken for some sort of imperfection. “This is a stone that you need more than anyone I’ve ever known. The universe has a way of correcting itself, I suppose.” There was a visible twinkle in his excited eyes, and he let out a low chuckle.

“This is an active Loras Stone.”

It took a moment for me to fully process his words. When I did, my eyes widened and my jaw hung open. A Loras Stone. An actual Loras Stone. Immediately after the original wishing incident, I would have given anything for a Loras Stone, but I’d surrendered that hope long ago. Now, though...I could change everything.

“Remember,” he continued to whisper, peering into my soul. “Use precise wording. The stone can sometimes detect approximate counter-wishes, but not always. You don’t want to squander this opportunity. The proper format is ‘I wish’, followed by the negative of the original wish. Do you remember my lecture about Loras Stones?”

I gulped and nodded vigorously, taking the spoon from his hand and clutching it as if it were the Holy Grail. For me, it essentially was. Based on what Grandma had said in her will, she did not know that this spoon contained a Loras Stone. Hell, I wasn’t even sure if she knew that I used to be Joseph. Probably not. Would I have even ended up with the spoon if I hadn’t helped her prepare dessert? If I hadn’t gone out of my way to be helpful? Geez, this was a massive opportunity.

I quickly realized that, if Mr. Bradley’s observation was correct, I would be faced with two questions: a colossal question and a logistical one:

First, I had to decide which of the three wishes against me I wanted to cancel. I briefly considered taking a stab at guessing the wording of an unknown wish that made the world a worse place, like: ‘I wish there was no more world hunger,’ or something along those lines. However, from what Mr. Bradley had told me, it sounded

like the stone would de-activate if I mis-worded a wish cancellation, and the risk was not worthwhile. I'd have to cancel one of Jarvis' three wishes.

The second question I faced was how I would use the Loras Stone. Obviously, I couldn't speak the words myself, and I'd have to choose someone to read out the words with precision. Someone who wouldn't let me down, or screw up. Someone who loved me more than anything in the world.

Sitting in my chair, I tuned out the remainder of the class, choosing first to ponder my choice between wishes. I had been cursed with three life-changing wishes. Each one presented a handful of difficulties, but I could only choose to eliminate one with the Loras Stone.

The first wish turned me into a girl, and - I suspected - made me act and think more femininely as well. It was a challenging transition, but I was happier as Johanna than I ever had as Joseph. I had friends and people who actually loved me. I suppose I was okay with the first wish. After thinking it over, I didn't even want to be a guy again. I was Johanna...that's simply who I was.

The second and third wishes presented a difficult decision. I bit my lip as I considered their consequences. The second wish prevented me from speaking, and thereby made me somewhat disabled. I'd have to work harder at school and work in order to achieve anything, and my life would be forever marred by miscommunications. I'd already experienced a taste of the lifelong struggle that awaited me if I didn't use the Loras Stone to erase the second wish. Without a doubt, being able to speak again would be a godsend.

The third wish, however, was just as damaging. It gave Jarvis free reign over the whole city, and his influence extended across the entire state, perhaps further. If I didn't cancel the third wish, I would have to leave Minnesota before Jarvis did something horrible to me. My family wouldn't want to move away and wouldn't believe my pleas. They'd think I was exaggerating, and convince themselves that they could handle the situation diplomatically through Jarvis' father, but Jarvis had made up his mind: he was going to ruin my life, because of what I did to him. He had no interest in accepting apologies, no faith in the fact that I could change, that I wasn't the same asshole who had verbally abused him and destroyed his childhood.

I'd have to run away and make a new life for myself...maybe I'd become a model or something. Clark probably wouldn't run away with me, because he had too much at stake here in Saint Paul, with an awaiting football scholarship and a loving family. I'd be all alone. Maybe I could stay with Uncle Gene down in Florida, and I could get a waitressing job.

I'd spend the rest of my life in hiding while Jarvis terrorized the city and found someone else to emotionally and physically destroy. There would never be justice.

My thoughts were interrupted by the buzzing of the electronic bell over the PA system, and I immediately tore a piece of paper out of my notebook and started writing down precise instructions with my delicate handwriting.

By the time I was finished, the entire room was almost empty. Mr. Bradley had been ambushed by a couple students and was being shaken down for extra credit points, so I chose not to disturb him any further. Meandering to the door and peeking my head out, I made sure that the coast was clear and Jarvis wasn't waiting for me. I took a deep breath and raced down the hallway. My heels clicked on the floor, chattering like the high-hat of a drum as I clutched my spoon as tightly as I could with my delicate hand. I knew exactly where I was heading.

I entered the girl's locker room, which was milling with changing cheerleaders, and eagerly tapped Megan on the shoulder. She was halfway through changing and was mid conversation with Sarah, giggling together about some television show.

"What's up?" Megan asked as she turned around to face me. There was a hint of caring concern in his voice, which was often present when she spoke to me. It was as if each of her sentences ended with an unspoken pet name or 'sweetie'.

I shoved my notebook paper into her hands with urgency, and her concern deepened as she began to read the note.

"So, this means...Wait, the spoon...you're saying that the spoon is a Loras Stone?" She scratched her lush black hair and bit her lip. My note had begun by explaining the situation and detailing the spoon and the Loras Stone in its handle. I also explained what a Loras Stone was, although that was probably unnecessary.

I nodded my head and held out the spoon in my right hand, presenting it to her like an offering to the gods. At this point, Sarah was intrigued beyond words and simply gawked by Megan's side. Most people who graduated junior high knew what a Loras Stone was, so she was likely beginning to appreciate the gravity of the situation.

"Okay, then." Megan took a deep, heavy breath and wrapped her hand around the walnut brown stone on the end of the spoon. Any passerby would look at the small stone, which barely stuck out from the handle and made the spoon somewhat unwieldy, and look past it without a second glance. I suppose that's what allowed it to remain unused for so many years. Either way, every time I looked at the stone, I felt a wave of joyous anticipation. I was the luckiest girl in the world.

Megan held my note in one hand while she touched the friendly stone, her eyes intently focused on the words I'd written. There was something beautiful about the

way her eyes moved when she read lines of text, as if they were peeling information off of the page itself. It was no wonder that she was a valedictorian candidate.

“I wish that Jarvis Duncan’s family did not always own this town.” It was an odd phrase, but I trusted Megan well enough to execute it flawlessly. As it turned out, my trust was well-placed. The words came out swiftly and easily, and I immediately felt their impact. It was hard to describe, as if somewhere in the confines of my mind, a voice announced that the counter-wish had been successful.

Megan looked up from the paper with a perplexed expression. “Why did you ask me to do that? You could have gotten your voice back...plus, Jarvis Duncan’s family never ‘owned this town’. That’s ridicul-”

She stopped speaking immediately and her eyes went wide with shock. She unleashed an audible gasp and opened and closed her mouth a few times, processing exactly what my counter-wish implied.

“Was that Jarvis Duncan’s wish?” Megan asked, piercing into my eyes and reading every slight movement of my face with steadfast intent.

I nodded, my lower lip trembling as I slowly formed a weak smile.

Staring at me, Megan’s brain began rapidly processing all of this new information. “All of them were Jarvis’ wishes. Weren’t they?”

I nodded once more, this time more fervently. My heart rose with elation and I embraced her in a tight hug, the top of my head nestled into her lower neck. Megan had figured it all out, and I hadn’t even needed to write it for her. For the first time since the wishing stone incident, the truth was unraveling.

“I...first I accused you of being a freak...even if you had done it on purpose, you aren’t a ‘freak’. You’re my sister. I love you.” Her voice cracked and tears stream down her cheeks, dampening the top of my head. “What the fuck is wrong with me? I’m so sorry.” She sniffled and tried to compose herself. “Then, you told me it was an accident, but it wasn’t an accident. He stole your voice...were you afraid of him?”

I nodded slight, just enough so she’d feel it in our hug. Involuntarily, I joined her with tears of my own. I’d noticed that every time I saw someone else crying, my own tears were quick to follow. It was similar to the contagious nature of yawns, where you’d see someone yawn and replicate it, despite your best efforts. I took a moment to consider Megan’s words. She really didn’t remember anything about how fearful everyone had been of Jarvis, did she? I suppose that was all part of the memory magic, although Mr. Bradley hadn’t specifically explained what would happen if a memory-alteration wish had been undone.



“Oh my God, I was there,” Sarah interrupted our sisterly moment with a ghostly voice, her face as pale as a sheet. “I was there.” Her re-iteration carried with it a tremendous sense of finality, as if she’d finally stumbled across the ultimate truth.

“What are you talking about?” Megan sniffled once more and began taking deeper, longer breaths. From the crying, her voice sounded more nasally and different than her usual syrupy sweet timbre. Like mine, her makeup was ruined and mascara ran down her face like an adventurous piece of abstract watercolor artwork. Even though we both wore waterproof athletic eyeliner and mascara, even the best ones were never completely effective. We’d both definitely have to fix up in the bathroom afterward.

“I saw what they did to you,” Sarah sounded profoundly stunned and, although she was looking my direction, she seemed to stare straight through me. “There were dozens of us, just watching. None of us did anything. Jarvis and that girl...you know, the bitchy one.” That sounded like an apt description of Tina. “They beat you up and...Oh my God. I remember everything. They cut your hair.” Her eyes finally began to focus on me. “I remembered it like it was in a foggy dream, but it wasn’t. It was real. It happened.” Her silver gray eyes teemed with regret, and she shook her heavy head. “Why didn’t anyone do anything? Why didn’t I do anything?” She held out her hands helplessly, and her whole body shook as though it was being rocked by an earthquake. “I’m so sorry.” As she spoke, the words barely escaped her mouth and came out in the most delicate of whispers.

In response, Megan and I opened up our hug to include Sarah. The three of us bawled our eyes out, until we could cry no more. Screw makeup. Releasing honest, genuine emotion was far more important. For me, they were primarily tears of joy. I no longer had to glance over my shoulder every time I walked down the street. I didn’t have to fear my own shadow, or dodge through the hallways like a frightened gazelle. I was free.

Sarah’s words only made me feel more secure. Without a doubt, the counter-wish had succeeded. Not only that, but people seemed capable of remembering the horrors of Jarvis’ short-lived yet brutal reign...and karma was about to catch up to him.

# CHAPTER 21

## *Eye of the Storm*

“Girls.” Coach Wendt’s gruff voice cut through our soft moment like a hot knife through butter, although I detected a hint of caring empathy in her tone. I used to think that she was harsh and emotionless, a female version of The Terminator, with a Minnesota accent rather than an Austrian one. However, my opinion of her had rapidly changed ever since I joined her squad. In truth, she was more similar to a protective mother bear, watching over her cubs with fierce loyalty. She was tender and supportive to ‘her girls’, as she called all of us on the cheer team. The respect was mutual, and I had no doubt in my mind that every girl on the team would walk across burning coals for that woman without a moment’s hesitation.

“What’s going on here? Spit it out.”

We broke off our hug and stood shoulder-to-shoulder, facing Coach before Megan spoke: “Someone hurt Johanna. Sarah saw what happened,” she sent Sarah a quick side-glance, as if she was passing the storytelling torch.

Sarah’s eyes were fixed on the ground as she spoke, in a weak voice that beared little resemblance to her typically vibrant aura. “Yesterday, they attacked her and did...other things,” she said the words deliberately and carefully, concluding with a gulp. The way she worded it made it sound as if they’d done something truly horrific. The truth is, they only punched me, kicked me, and cut my hair, but those were all quite serious offenses.

“Who?” Coach’s voice was as cold as ice and sent a furious chill coursing down my spine. Her clenched jaw twitched as she awaited a reply, and her amber eyes burned with infernal rage.

“Jarvis Duncan and that one girl...” Sarah began, before trailing off.

“Tina Lawski,” Megan offered, apparently more familiar with the younger sophomore class than her cheer captain.

Sarah and I both nodded solemnly, sharing a fleeting glance of solidarity.

“Did they leave any marks? Any evidence, besides the haircut?” Coach didn’t vocalize her entire train of thought, but it likely concluded with ‘If not, it’s your word against theirs.’

Fortunately, there was an abundance of evidence. Fishing out my whiteboard from my torn backpack, I began to write I recorded the whole thing with a video camera. The file is on my Google drive. Wishes couldn’t change the past, they could only alter the present and memories. Theoretically, the Loras Stone shouldn’t have been able to change the past, either, meaning that the video footage would be unscathed.

As I wrote, Sarah spoke in a slightly more confident tone. “There were dozens of other witnesses. They may not remember clearly at first...it’s hard to explain. Trying to remember whole thing just seems...foggy.”

I flipped my handy whiteboard around and showed it to all three of them. The first glints of hope began to appear on their weary faces. Justice was on the way.

Putting down the whiteboard, I brandished my ripped up backpack. It was probably less critical evidence, but evidence nevertheless. Its shredded interior suggested that it was either attacked by a wild animal or a brainless brute.

“Okay, then.” Coach approached me with a tone that would reassure even the most frightful of bunny rabbits. Laying a worn, sun-kissed hand on my shoulder, she peered down at me with pride and understanding. “You’re a strong one, Johanna,” she whispered in a sandpapery voice, before returning to her normal tone. She did know my name! I knew it! “Let’s get you and Sarah to the Principal’s office, okay? Megan, get your shirt on and make them run some drills. No stunts, just the basic cheers. Understood?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Megan replied with military compliance, pulling her white Wildcats shirt over her head. She gave me a light squeeze on the arm and leaned toward me. “I love you, little sis,” she whispered in a sincere tone, as if the words had come straight from her heart. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

I love you too, I mouthed in response. Unfortunately, I was a moment too late, and she had already turned to leave. She grabbed her white and green pompoms before jogging out of the locker room. I smiled faintly as I watched her go. She was better than me in just about every way, but actually cared about me. Perhaps one day, I would be like her. I guess I would never be as tall as her, and my boobs would always be

smaller, and she'd probably always be a bit smarter than me. Maybe that was all acceptable, though. Aside from intelligence, those were all physical differences, and I was smart enough to know that I shouldn't preoccupy myself with those sort of things. I was perfectly fine with being her little sister. Sure, I'd always be following in her footsteps, but her footsteps were well-placed.

As if I was the last panda bear on Earth, Coach and Sarah escorted me down the hallway. Their eyes scanned the empty white corridors for trouble and their arms were coiled tensely, ready to protect me at a moment's notice.

It didn't take long for us to reach the frosted glass window which read 'Principal Morris' in precise, royal blue letters. Coach stepped forward and rapped her firm fist against the glass in two measured strikes.

Morris' muffled voice barked from within, his unmistakable Southern twang on full display: "If you're fixing to come in, come in. Don't just stand out there like a herd of turtles." Those words, if uttered from anyone other than Morris himself, would have resulted in perplexity and genuine confusion. However, everyone expected odd sayings and phrases from him. Largely unfazed by his 'turtle' reference, we shuffled our way inside of his office.

I'd never actually been inside of Morris' office before, and wasn't surprised to see the walls lined with pennants, banners, and posters. They were all advertising the University of Auburn's college football program. I wasn't sure where Auburn was, but I imagine it was somewhere in the South. Morris seemed to have an odd obsession with that school. Beyond his desk was a massive life-size poster taking up a good portion of that particular wall. On the poster was a football player in an Auburn jersey whose name - according to the words scrawled along the bottom - was 'Bo Jackson'.

According to the case with replica trophies in the corner of his office, I learned that Auburn had won two 'National Championships.' From the metallic gleam of the fake metal statues, the championships seemed like a big deal. Before I saw Clark's game, I struggled to grasp how people could become so passionate about football. Now, though, it kind've made sense to me. There was a familial passion between spectators, all cheering for their team to win. It was like a game of Battlefield, when our whole team attempts to capture Objective Apples. When people unite behind a common goal, it creates a beautiful sense of belonging.

The rest of Morris' office was decorated with deep orange and navy blue colors, and was pristinely clean. On his spartan desk was a white latex glove dispenser, a closed laptop, and a humble mason jar that had been repurposed as a pen holder. Beside the jar was a photograph of Morris and a joyous brunette woman sharing a deep embrace,

both dressed in impeccable wedding attire. I glanced up from the photo and inspected Morris as he sat at his desk. I made a mental note of the fact that, beneath his gloved hand, Morris didn't appear to be wearing a wedding ring.

A bright fluorescent light shined off of Morris' bald head and gave it the appearance of a well-polished bowling ball, ready to be tossed down an awaiting alley. He briefly scanned us with his cozy almond-brown eyes, surveying Coach Wendt with careful intrigue before returning his gaze to the neat stack of documents before him. He wore an expression of sheer ambivalence, as if he was hesitant to take time out of his day to hear about cheerleading drama. Of course, the reason for our visit was far more pressing and grave than he assumed.

"Spit it out," he ordered, his focus still trained on the printed page. At closer glance, it appeared to be a mundane procedural paper. He probably spent hours every day just like this, dutifully completing paperwork. Again, I was overcome by a wave of sympathy for the unfortunate man. I hoped that he had someone who cherished and loved him.

"Edward," Coach Wendt greeted Principal Morris in a personal tone, as if he was a dear friend. "One of my girls was attacked by two other students."

Typical of her, the words came out bluntly and truthfully, spoken with intensity. The drop of each syllable carried a measured weight, and her eyes seemed to be lit with shades of orange and red, smoldering with harnessed rage. Once she began speaking, her tone was impossible to ignore. Morris promptly looked up from his paper, his forehead creased with concern, and his mouth slightly ajar in surprise.

He cleared his throat and scratched the back of his neck, before he rasped a reply.

"Attacked?" He didn't seem to have any witty saying or colloquial remark this time. In a matter of seconds, entire demeanor had changed, and he appeared to be utterly crestfallen.

Coach put a comforting hand on my shoulder, and guided me into one of the chairs in front of Morris' desk. Carefully, I lowered myself into the seat and crossed my legs at the thigh, before straightening my skirt. As I did, she and Sarah seated themselves on either side of me.

Coach leaned forward, her elbows mounted on her knees, and her hands clasped tightly. Taking a deep breath, she wore a grim frown. "Sarah was there. Go ahead and tell him what happened."

Sarah cast her eyes down in shame and fidgeted with the hem of her forest green cheerleading skirt, gulping nervously before she began to tell her story: "Well, it was after morning cheer practice. I was on my way to Math when I saw a big circle of

people in the hallway. I tried to move closer to see what was going on, and..." She glanced at me for a fraction of a second, her face sullen in guilt. "Johanna was on the ground, and..."

She vividly described everything they did to me, bringing back memories that I had tried to muffle into oblivion. I suppose the longer Sarah thought about it, the more clearly her memories of the events returned. The worst part was that she believed that she had opted not to help me, and she could only vaguely recall why she'd made that decision. She struggled to remember the control that Jarvis had over all of our lives, and instead blamed herself.

As she spoke, Coach Wendt and Principal Morris both sat in tense silence, sharing occasional eye contact with one another. Both of their faces were strained, lines of stress creasing their brows and jaws clenched in anger. Obviously, they were both worried about the damage to the school's reputation that came with cases like this, but I could tell that something else was bothering them. Studying them closely, I realized that they genuinely cared about this...about me, and my well-being, and Sarah's as well.

"And that's...that's basically everything." Sarah concluded, as tears began to meander their way down her cheeks. The emotional streams stuck her perfect blonde hair to her face, like wet feathers on glass. "I'm so sorry," she managed as she began to hyperventilate, her breaths shallow and swift.

Without a word, I placed a slender hand over hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. With my other hand, I fished my whiteboard out of my backpack and began writing a message to her. I expected for the conversation to continue as I did so, but instead silence hung heavy in the air. Every eye in the room was trained on me, as I began delicately planting letters onto the familiar white surface.

It's not your fault that you couldn't intervene. It was part of Jarvis' wish.

"Slow down there, Seabiscuit," Morris said in the softest voice he could muster. His use of a nickname suggested that he was over the initial shock of the revelations. Either that, or the silly phrases were his way of dealing with emotionally strenuous situations. "You're saying that Jarvis made a wish? He had a wishing stone?"

I nodded my head enthusiastically, glad that he was beginning to understand my situation. The truth was coming out, and soon everyone would know.

"Jarvis took away her voice and made her a girl." Sarah remarked, her voice hovering like a hummingbird, just above a whisper. "And he made himself immune. None of us could do anything about it. Johanna found a Loras Stone, though, and I was there when Megan used it to get rid of that wish."

I squeezed her hand a bit harder, and sent her the most loving look I could muster. She returned a weak smile, which was still infectious enough to electrify the room with hope. Sarah had a remarkable trait: when she was happy, everyone around her was happy. To me, her meager smile was more powerful than a simple twitch of facial muscles. It meant that she forgave herself, and wouldn't let her regretful inaction loom over her head.

"Johanna says she took a video of the whole..." Coach Wendt's voice choked up momentarily, as her hard demeanor faded away like morning fog. "...the whole incident."

I put my whiteboard to use once more, jotting down a new note: I can bring it up if I could use your laptop, I wrote in my trademark font, turning the whiteboard to show the Principal.

"Oh," he chuckled softly and winced. "I tried using that machine a few months ago, but I couldn't get it to turn on. It's like putting stilts on ants. Ain't worth the trouble. I liked my old one much better."

The 'machine' was a newish model MacBook, probably given to all of the principals in the school district, in district's effort to modernize education. Of course, the laptop ended up laying dormant on Morris' squeaky-clean desk for God knew how long. How did Morris get any work done at all if he wasn't reachable through email? Maybe he used one of the desktops in the teacher's lounge.

Uncrossing my legs and biting my lip, I walked up to the Principal's desk and gingerly flipped open the laptop. I'd never been a fan of Macs myself, so I felt no immense sense of loss over the unused technology. If it was a new gaming PC, I probably would have been slightly irked by its neglect. Seeing if I could identify the issue, I pressed the power button. Nope, nothing. Thinking on my feet, I scanned the room for a power charger. Because of the room's neat state, it wasn't difficult to locate the charger, which had been left in its original packaging on a shelf near the trash bin. Morris eyed me with intrigue as I plugged in the power cord and began charging the laptop. On my next boot attempt, the laptop sprung to life and I was soon greeted by an unpersonalized desktop.

Morris' eyes went wide and he craned his neck to get a better look at the screen. "I'll be damned. So the machine needs to be plugged in?"

The answer was both yes and no...far too complicated for me to explain without words, so I didn't even try. Instead, I idly nodded, and began setting up the internet connection. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Sarah. She seemed to be in better spirits, and was suppressing a charming grin. I suppose it was somewhat

amusing to see such a commanding hard-ass struggle with basic technology, but I couldn't find any humor in Morris' difficulties. He hadn't been dealt a good hand in life. After studying him closely, I decided that he was an isolated, lonely man who disguised his hopelessness with witty phrases. About three weeks ago, I'd been living a similar life. I coped with my loneliness by being a confrontational know-it-all and basking in my intelligence, but we both suffered from the same ailment. So what if he wasn't adept with new technology? Who was I to judge him? He was likely far more skilled than me at a myriad of tasks. If anything, he deserved to be treated with kindness and respect.

It didn't take long for me to log in and locate the video among my files. Coach stood behind me to watch the video while Sarah sat nervously, tapping her nails against her chair and avoiding eye contact. My hand hovered over the touchpad, about to press 'Play', when I remembered the outcome last time. A small wave of nausea hit me, and I dashed back to my chair, tears already starting to well in my eyes. I didn't want to watch that video again. Instead, I let Coach Wendt and Principal Morris click 'Play' and watch through the video in its entirety. As they watched, I studied their faces closely. I read their anger, frustration, and overwhelming disgust. I'd grown quite good at reading emotions, ever since that fateful day in the boy's locker room. Sometimes, I wondered if Jarvis' wishes had granted me some sort of super power. Of course, that was a silly thought. I was just gaining more perspective on the world, and actually paying attention.

"Carol," Morris gave Coach a caring glance. "Call the police." He turned his attention to me, silently staring for a few seconds. "I'll phone her parents." The video was fresh on his mind, and no Southern sayings were to be had. His twang was present, but his vowels not nearly as bouncy as before. Much like Coach, he had a soft core beneath his granite shell, and this whole situation had left him deeply disturbed.

\* \* \*

For some reason, I imagined that the order to "Call the police" would be promptly followed by the wailing of sirens and an armada of squad cars pulling into the school parking lot. Of course, that wasn't how the world worked. Instead, it resulted in three authoritative knocks on Principal Morris' office door after almost a full hour had passed. In the interim, I'd enlightened them about my past run-ins with Jarvis and Tina, including difficult details about the wishing stone incident. All three of them had been beyond understanding, and believed everything I wrote to them.



"Come in," Morris allowed, and the door crept open, revealing a plain-clothed man and woman.

"Hello, I'm Detective Bernsen, and this is Detective Nystrom. We're with the Saint Paul Police Department." Bernsen was a redhead with bright, glowing eyes who appeared to be in her mid thirties. Her fiery hair wandered freely down the back of her neck in a natural wave, flowing over her gray scarf and fashionable midnight-black coat. Her voice carried throughout the room in a melodious honey tone, and I imagined that she had a lovely singing voice. After speaking, she pursed her lips and carefully scanned the room, absorbing every detail like a seasoned investigator.

"We understand that you've reported an assault took place on school grounds." Detective Nystrom chipped in, as the pair strode into the now-cramped office.

Assault. I suppose that was a justifiable description of what Jarvis and Tina did to me, but hearing that word uttered by a detective...it made the situation seem so much more real. Goosebumps began to creep their way up my body, and I crossed my arms tightly over my stomach. I'd been assaulted. The word was jarring. The mere thought made me shake. As my jaw started to tremble weakly, I noticed that Bernsen was staring at me, and I met her gaze. Although Sarah was also in the room with me, Bernsen had astutely read my body language and determined that I was the victim. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised, as careful perception was a critical part of her job.

"We'd like to ask some questions," Nystrom continued. A tall man, Nystrom towered well above than anyone else in the room. He stood with confidence, his was back straight and his brow furrowed. His close-cropped hair and gleaming black boots gave him an ex-military appearance, and may have been an indicator of his past.

"Absolutely," Coach spoke in reply, as she tried to keep her voice level. "Sarah here witnessed the attack, and we've also got a video of the whole thing on here." She gestured toward the laptop sitting on the Principal's desk with a grimace on her face.

"Actually, I was wondering if I could speak to her in private for a few minutes. Is it alright if we go into the room next door?" Detective Bernsen gestured toward me, and I sat in petrified surprise with all fixed eyes on me. As Principal Morris had once said: 'like a bull moose on Broadway.'

"Johanna, is that okay with you?" Coach asked, putting a comforting hand on my shoulder.

I timidly nodded, and rose to follow her out of the room and into the hallway. As we left, Nystrom began asking questions and it was only a matter of time before they showed him the video. It made me feel sick...how many people were going to end up

seeing that video? Of course, I was glad that I recorded it, as it was a crucial piece of evidence, but just thinking about the footage made me sick.

\* \* \*

I found myself sitting next to Detective Bernsen in a small, empty conference room, across the hall from Principal Morris' office. The room was a monotonous sight, with bland white walls and a lone wooden meeting desk. The desk was likely designed to seat people on opposite ends, but Bernsen made sure to grab a seat right next to me. She moved our chairs to face one another at a diagonal angle, leaving just inches between our knees. It was a salient effort to establish a trusting relationship and make this feel less like an interrogation. Geez, she was about to be in for a nasty surprise when she inevitably realized that I wasn't able to 'speak' with her at all. I felt a pang of guilty over it...Bernsen was clearly passionate about her job, and my mutism would only make things harder for her. I wondered why none of the other three told her about my problem before she escorted me out. Maybe they felt that I could handle an interview, despite my disability. Pride swelled in my heart.

"So, Johanna," Bernsen smiled pleasantly at me, speaking in a voice that oozed warmth. This wasn't her first rodeo. She knew exactly how to put people at ease when questioning them. "That's a pretty skirt, where'd you get it?"

Her first question took me off guard, but I suppose it made sense. She didn't want to immediately dive into the gritty stuff. Her approach was to establish a conversational rapport beforehand, and put me at ease. She really did want to help me, though. I saw it in her sympathetic eyes. Also, she was right. It was indeed a pretty skirt, tight and dark blue, decorated with small white snowflakes. I loved it, and it was probably my favorite winter skirt.

In response, I simply looked at her and flashed a brief smile. Anthropologie, I mouthed. It was a difficult word, and she probably had no idea what I'd said. Frustratingly, I'd forgotten to bring backpack, and thus my whiteboard. They were both still in Principal Morris' office, so communication was going to be quite difficult.

"Can you hear me?" She said, briefly turning her head so that I wouldn't be able to read her lips.

As she turned back to face me, I nodded in reply. I suppose this was her way of checking whether or not I was deaf without outright asking me. How tactful of her.

"Can you talk for me?" Bernsen asked with her calming voice.

Holding her gaze, I shook my head No. She probably thought I was so emotionally traumatized that I was suffering from selective mutism. It wouldn't be the first time I'd gotten that reaction. This wasn't an emotional problem, it was a physical one. To illustrate that, I pointed to my throat. I can't talk, I mouthed. Hopefully she had a pen and paper, or else this conversation was going to be a struggle.

"That's okay, that's perfectly fine." She tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear and sent me a pleasant smile. "Do you know sign language?"

After a long pause, I nodded. My sign language was far from perfect. Although I was a rapid learner, I'd only begun practicing the language a couple weeks ago. Was she planning to bring in an interpreter for me? I didn't want her to phone in some sign language expert. That'd be such a hassle for everyone, and it wasn't necessary.

How are you feeling? She asked in sign language, her hands dancing with practiced ease. My eyes widened a bit. Detective Bernsen knew sign language, and she knew it well. Way better than I did. I could tell that she slowed down her signing for me, for which I was beyond grateful.

Okay, I replied carefully and deliberately, deeply self-conscious of my clumsy hand movements. How do you know sign language?

My youngest sister was deaf, she explained, her perfectly manicured nails moving in sync. I've been signing since I was a child. Damn...her nails looked good, I noted with a hint of envy. Hell, everything about her looked good. I'd have to ask for fashion tips.

Cool, I replied, trying my best to wear a smile on my face. God, I could only imagine what I looked like. I was probably a mess, with smeared eyeliner and mascara running down my cheeks. I hadn't been able to fix my makeup after my most recent crying session with Megan...Megan. A rogue tear began to trickle down my cheek. Detective Bernsen reminded me of Megan. Bernsen learned sign language just to communicate with her little sister...she cared about her sister just like Megan cared for me. Like usual, I was quick to tears. The stream turned into a river, and Bernsen placed a comforting hand on top of mine.

"I'm on your side, Johanna. I'm here for you," she reassured me, speaking in her tranquil tone. It was almost as if I was a nervous sparrow perched on her windowsill and she was coaxing me into staying put. "Do you want to tell me about what happened?"

As soon as I heard the pleading tone in her voice, I told her everything. From the wishing stone to the multiple beatings to my recent decision to use the Loras Stone, I let it all out. It was difficult to explain exactly what happened using sign language, but

I managed. Despite the troubling circumstances, I was happy to find someone who knew sign language. It was almost as if my hours of practice were finally validated.

Throughout the conversation, I was an emotional mix of nervous, frazzled, and excited. Emotions never seemed to come into my brain single-filed. Instead, they came in waves, competing for my attention. While I told the tale of Jarvis and Tina, the waves were towering. My joy over Bernsen's sign language abilities and her calming demeanor were offset by the vivid recounting of every single attack. I could practically smell Jarvis' greasy stench in the room as I signed. Underneath all of that, though, lay an overwhelming sense of relief. It felt as if the world's heaviest weight had been lifted, now that the truth was escaping to the world. My days of living in terror were over.

I realized that it was Detective Bernsen's job to make an emotional connection with me to speed along the process of obtaining evidence. Still, I felt as if we bonded on a profound level throughout our chat.

"Johanna," she addressed me endearingly, as she rose from her chair and stood before me. She had been exclusively speaking to me rather than signing for the last half hour. I suspected that she realized that my ability to read other peoples' sign language was lacking, and wanted to make the interview as easy for me as possible.

"Thank you for being so honest with me. I know that opening up about these sort of things is very difficult, and you made the right choice to tell your Coach. You're a selfless young woman, and you make the world a better place for everyone around you." For the first time, her voice started to waver and she clenched her jaw with frustrated intensity. She didn't say the words, but she was going to do everything in her power to ensure that there would be justice for Jarvis and Tina.

In our chat, Detective Bernsen had briefly mentioned the potential charges of Stalking, Harassment, Aggravated Assault charges and Wishing Stone Abuse. The latter was difficult to prove. However, using a wishing stone to cause direct harm upon others was a felony. Regardless, there was ample evidence for the other three charges. Expulsion seemed like a foregone conclusion, and if they were found guilty of either Aggravated assault or Wishing Stone Abuse, both Jarvis and Tina would be facing lengthy sentences in juvie.

Rather than replying to her in sign language, I bounced to my feet and wrapped her in a tight hug. She let out a faint gasp, and did her best to imitate a statue. I clung to her regardless, and figured that she didn't receive very many hugs on the job. Eventually, she made the decision to return the hug. It was probably against police code for a detective to hug a victim and witness, but Bernsen ignored the rules for a

few moments. Her arms wrapped around me and I buried my face in her comforting crimson hair. Perhaps I was too trusting or too amicable, but I already thought of Bernsen as a good friend and I'd only known her for the better part of an hour. I didn't even know her first name.

"Okay, Johanna." She smiled at me like a proud lioness. "How about we go back to the Principal's office and wait for your parents to pick you up?"

I nodded obediently, and walked as close to her side as she would allow. My arm brushed against her coat with each step, and I secretly wished that she would hold my hand...just for security. When we reached Principal Morris' door and re-entered the office, I was pleased to hear my sister's honey voice.

"Johanna!" Megan greeted me, her face alive with radiance that rivaled the sun, illuminating the cramped, Auburn-obsessed room. Coach, Principal Morris, Sarah, and Detectives Nystrom and Bernsen stood by and watched, but they might as well have been in a different dimension. Megan was the only person who mattered to me, at that moment.

I dashed into her arms and we shared yet another suffocating hug. I loved hugging Megan. She was the perfect hugging height, and my head fit right under her chin when we embraced. I was hugging people a lot these days, and I had a few explanations for that.

First, I wore my emotions on my sleeve more than I did before. I suspected that the wish changed me mentally, although my new body chemistry may have played a natural role. I wasn't sure why my expression of emotions had changed, but I was certain of one fact: this was the new me. I was Johanna, and I wasn't afraid of displaying affection.

Alternatively, the frequent hugging could have a different origin. Since I could no longer vocalize my communications, body language had become infinitely more important to me. From the faintest smile to the slight movement of someone's hand, I was more sensitive to people's movements than ever before. Physical contact was the most extreme form of body language, and I found it intoxicating and exhilarating. It was as if my body was overdosing on happiness every time I made contact with another person...like I was connecting with them on some universal, mystical level.

"Mom and Dad are on their way," she whispered into my ear, as her arms engulfed me. "I love you so much." Her voice cracked as she spoke, as if it was fighting its way past a giant lump in her throat.

I love you, too I thought.

Sitting restlessly in the chair, surrounded by people who cared about me, I thought I would be prepared for my parents' arrival. I was certain that I'd be able to contain myself, that I wouldn't make a scene. Of course, that notion was tossed out the window as soon as I saw their outlines through the frosted glass on Principal Morris' door. I didn't need to see the details on their worried, pained faces, or witness their shaking hands and uneven breaths. All I had to see was their mere silhouettes, and my imagination filled in the rest.

For the umpteenth time that day, slick tears channeled their way down my face like fresh streaks of thin paint. I'd stopped all attempts to bottle up my emotions, and just let the tears flow.

Mom and Dad wore the exact same grave expressions that I had expected, summoning even more stinging tears. However, those expressions were short-lived. As soon as they laid their eyes on me, their eyebrows soared and smiles split their fretful faces. I suppose the knowledge that I was safe and well eclipsed all other concerns. Mom dashed toward me and wrapped me in a hug, lifting me up off the ground with ease in her raw excitement.

"Oh my God, Johanna." Tears stained her eyes as she spoke. "They said that somebody hurt you, and..." She sniffled and fought through her tears to manage a loving grin, taking a moment to carefully place me back onto the ground. "Everything is going to be okay. We're here for you." She stroked a careful hand through my hair as we hugged. Her metal wedding band was cold against my head, but her parka-enclosed body lent mine comforting warmth. The hug became substantially warmer and more constricting when both Dad and Megan joined. I'd become so accustomed to hugging Megan that I didn't even need to open my eyes to know that she had joined us. I knew she was near purely based on her floral scent.

The room was silent around us as we embraced. At first, I assumed that I had tuned out everything other than my family, and didn't think anything of it. However, I soon realized that everyone else in the room was watching us intently, their dialogues paused for a moment of quiet observance. For the detectives, seeing the four of us reunite was likely the most gratifying part of their job. They'd brought a small sliver of hope and joy to me...the victim. It pained me to think about myself as a victim, but I suppose that it was an accurate description at the moment. I grimaced at the bitter irony, as I nuzzled into Mom. The whole reason I'd gotten involved in the most recent scuffle and subsequent assault was because I wanted to prove that I wasn't a victim. I

chose to stand in between Jarvis and that poor kid he'd been beating into the ground...and I'd won. Not at first, of course. It took courage, sacrifice, and the fortunate, unlikely discovery of an heirloom Loras Stone. The pathway was messy, but the result was clear: I was the victor.

After what could have been seconds or millennia, our hug came to its inevitable end, but we still stood near each other. Mom and Dad rested a hand on each of my shoulders as Bernsen's voice lofted through the room. Like usual, it was as level as the ocean and exuded a lulling, sanctuary warmth.

"My name is Detective Bernsen. Can I talk to you two in private for a moment?"

My parents quickly agreed and the three left the room together. Sarah, Megan, and I stood quietly in the room with Morris, Coach, and Detective Nystrom, awaiting their return. There was a silent understanding between all of us, so loaded with meaning that words couldn't lend it justice. The kind that you could slice through like the fatty edges of a piece of sirloin steak.

With a forced cough, Nystrom broke the silence. "Johanna." His voice startled me momentarily, but I recovered with wide eyes. "With your permission, we'd like to admit the video you took as a piece of evidence."

I nodded automatically. I'd already told my story, and the video validated it. The point of no return had been passed long ago.

Seeing my affirmation, Nystrom leaned over Principal Morris' computer, likely sending the file to the Saint Paul Police records.

I suspected that this situation was going to be quite serious for Jarvis and Tina. Speaking of Jarvis and Tina...what were they doing, while I talked to the police? Had they noticed that Jarvis' wish no longer worked? I suppose they must have. Tina would have realized that Jarvis was no longer the most powerful person in Minnesota. Closing my eyes, I pictured her pouty face, on the verge of tears because she no longer had the power to ruin other people's' lives. Would she break up with Jarvis because he wasn't powerful anymore? Maybe...probably not, though. Sadistic, stupid, and cruel, they were a perfect match for each other. A match made in hell.

\* \* \*

When Mom and Dad returned from their chat with Bernsen, the worry on their faces was overshadowed by guilt. It took me only one glance to confirm that they remembered their hesitance to report my earlier run-ins with Jarvis to the police. Like Sarah, they probably wouldn't remember exactly why they'd made that decision. They

wouldn't remember the details of his wish, and how it felt to be utterly powerless versus the Duncan family. I'd told Bernsen about all of Jarvis' wishes and she'd likely informed Mom and Dad, but guilt seldom worked rationally. Hopefully they didn't think of themselves as bad parents. They were the best parents in the world, as far as I was concerned.

"Oh, honey." Mom said, avoiding my gaze. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, much like Sarah had.

This time, I had been prepared for such an apology. In fact, while they were in the interview room, I had drafted a pre-written message explaining why this was not their fault. I presented it to them and let them read it. Their watery eyes tracked across the notebook page with intense concentration, eager to process my scarce words. Unfortunately, I had a feeling it would take more than one simple letter for them to forgive themselves. Perhaps it would take days, months, or even years. Forgiveness was a winding path, and they were at the trailhead.

"We'll be releasing Johanna to you now," Bernsen said, addressing my parents in a business-like manner.

"I'd recommend that she take a few days off school. Feel free to call my direct line if you need assistance with anything. A patrol car from the SPPD will escort you home. Given the violent history of the suspects, we're going to keep a 24-hour police detail on your home." Bernsen and Nystrom shared a brief glance.

"Thank you," Mom and Dad replied in perfect unison.

With the hint of a wry smile, Bernsen continued, "I think we have everything we need here, and we'll be heading straight to the D.A. Within the hour, we'll likely have a warrant." Turning to Sarah and I, her eyes sparkled like a brilliant wishing stone and she lowered her voice to just above a whisper.

"You're both very strong young women. With the video, I don't think either of you will need to testify on the stand."

A wave of relief washed over me, and I suspect that Sarah had a similar reaction. I couldn't even imagine sitting in a courtroom with Jarvis and Tina glaring at me while I relived every horrible moment.

Thank you, I signed to her, causing a faint smile to cross her lips.

Just doing my job, she replied, although I knew that was only part of the story. She was likely comforting with most victims, but she genuinely cared about me. I saw it in her twinkling eyes, in the way that her face creased when I cried. I reminded her of her little sister.



Staring out the window of Dad's car, I watched the flurries of snow as they spiraled their way to the ground. I always liked the snow. There was something intriguing about it. The way it would topple down from the sky and swirl to the ground. I took a deep sniff, but wasn't able to smell any snow...just the SUV's pleasant leather interior. Behind us, a four-wheel-drive police vehicle followed closely, which made me feel even more secure. I was finally safe.

One snowflake stuck to the window directly in front of my nose, and intrigued me. It was quite large for a snowflake...what was its story? Maybe it used to be part of a group of snowflakes, and now found itself all alone...trapped against the window's cruel glass, unable to perform its basic function of fluttering to the ground. My heart panged with sadness for the personified sliver of frozen water. Reaching a hand up, I touched the glass, tracing the special snowflake with my shimmering blue fingernail.

"Storm's coming," Mom noted solemnly, breaking my concentration.

"Big ole blizzard," Dad agreed with a chuckle.

Still looking out the window, I managed a small grin and brushed a stray strand of raven hair behind my ear. I wasn't afraid of a blizzard. People around here loved to complain about the weather, even though many of us made the conscious decision to live in Minnesota. I was legitimately unfazed by the weather, whether it be blizzards, hell, or high water. I was glad to be alive, surrounded by people who loved me.

As far as I was concerned, I'd already survived the darkest storm.

# CHAPTER 22

## *Better Angels of Our Nature*

“O kay, okay, okay. I’ve got eight more questions, right?” Dad asked, firelight dancing on his unshaven face.

I nodded eagerly. Just as I did, the grandfather clock in our living room struck midnight. Both Megan and Mom had already gone to sleep over half an hour ago, leaving the house dark and quiet. Dad and I sat cross-legged near the fireplace, facing each other as flames illuminated the room. It had been a long day for everyone, with the Loras Stone and the investigation, but Dad and I weren’t going to head to bed until our game was finished.

We still hadn’t heard anything from the cops about Jarvis and Tina, although the police had been searching for hours. If it wasn’t for Dad’s calming presence and the squad car parked outside our driveway, I probably would have been consumed with worry. Instead, I was content. Warmed by the fire, with fuzzy pink slippers on my feet and a mug of hot chocolate in my hands, I was in heaven. I even had a plaid blanket around my shoulders, secured in place by a quaint blue brooch with an inch-long needle-pin, which caused the warm covering to drape over my shoulders like a superhero cape. Mom had given me the brooch and fastened it, because the blanket cape kept slipping off my shoulders.

My phone sat beside me. When I arrived at home, I had to respond to worried texts from Caroline, Olivia, and - of course - Clark. I suppose word of Jarvis’ villainy had spread quickly through the school. After mollifying my friends’ concerns and assuring them that I was safe, Dad and I had begun our intense game of Twenty Questions.

“That doesn’t count as a question, by the way,” Dad said with a knowing smile. I tilted my head with a pout, but nodded once more.

“It’s not a spoon again, is it?”

I grinned and shook my head No. I wasn’t bold enough to choose ‘Spoon’ in two consecutive iterations of Twenty Questions. Speaking of the spoon, it was still sitting inside a secure pouch of my backpack. Wiggling my toes near the waning fire, I made another mental promise to take care of that old, mysterious spoon. Although its magical properties were spent, I wouldn’t let it wither. For some reason, I felt like Grandma’s soul was living on through the wooden utensil, rooting for me on my quest to live a happier life.

“Can it be found in our house?”

I nodded, licking my lips nervously. My heartbeat quickened. He’d uncovered a major hint, and now I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to win.

“Hmmm,” Dad muttered pensively. “Is it the poker?” he gestured toward the sharp, pronged poker-stick, used to tend the fireplace and turn over logs.

With a slight smile, I shook my head. No.

“Okay...” Dad bobbed his head slowly, deep in thought. “Is it something that people wear?”

I sighed and nodded again. With four questions left, Dad was closing in on the object I’d chosen.

“Okay,” Dad rubbed his cheek thoughtfully. “Is it something that I’m wearing?” Dad asked, gesturing down to his work clothing: a nice button-down with dress pants.

With a silent giggle, I shook my head No. Three questions left.

“Are you wearing it?”

I nodded, no longer giggling. This game was going to have a close finish, and I was no longer confident that I would be victorious.

“Is it your pajamas?” he asked, glancing down at the comfy purple pajama pants that I wore. I changed into them as soon as we got home.

I quickly shook my head. He had one guess left, and I anxiously tapped my foot against the hardwood floor, creating an urgent rhythm.

Dad took a deep breath. “Okay, let’s see. You’ve got your t-shirt, your blanket, your beanie, and your slippers. If I was Johanna, what would I choose?” He rubbed his cheek once more. “Well, you wouldn’t choose your t-shirt. You’d probably try to be sneaky and choose your blanket, since people don’t usually think of a blanket as something that you ‘wear’. Then again, you might have chosen those hot pink slippers of yours, since they stand out so much. Hiding in plain sight.”

I wiggled my nose and attempted to wear my best poker face. Dad had correctly narrowed the search down to two of my clothing articles, and he had a fifty percent chance of winning the game. Everything was riding on his final guess.

“Is it...” he began, before being interrupted by the blare of police sirens.

Both of us hopped to our feet and dashed to the living room window, peering out toward the street. The squad car, which had been posted at our house to watch over us, had its sirens whirring red and blue as it pulled away from our house and zoomed down the quiet suburban street.

“They’re leaving?” Dad asked, a hint of confusion in his voice. “I bet they found those two kids.”

I nodded, putting my hands up against the window. Jarvis and Tina weren’t going to torment me anymore. A grin spread across my face. The evil pair was probably being shoved into a squad car, and would become well acquainted with the local jail. Unless, of course, the police hadn’t caught Jarvis and Tina. What if they were still out there, and the squad car departed for completely unrelated reasons? No, that was outlandish, paranoid thinking. That terrible chapter of my life was over. Finally over.

Dad wrapped a calming arm around me, giving my shoulder a reassuring squeeze with his hand.

“I told you that everything would work out, didn’t I?” Dad asked in a soft, warm voice.

I nodded thoughtfully, tucking a short strand of raven-black hair behind my ear.

Slowly, he guided me back toward the fireplace, and we sunk back into our cross-legged sitting positions. For some reason, I still didn’t feel fully secure. Everything was going so well. Although people had a difficult time remembering all of Jarvis’ horrible deeds in vivid detail, the truth was quickly emerging. After using the Loras stone, my plans had worked out flawlessly...too flawlessly, perhaps.

Danger lurking in the back of my mind, I glanced toward the window to our front yard. It was ominously dark outside, without the squad car’s sirens illuminating the street. I could only barely make out the trees as they danced in the wind, which was beginning to howl. The storm was already on its way. At the moment, only a few snowflakes swirled in the air, but that would undoubtedly change in the coming hours.

“Sweetie, are you alright?” Dad furrowed his eyebrows and followed my line of sight, toward the dark front window.

I took a deep, calming sigh, and nodded once again. That dreadful feeling which lurked in the pit of my stomach was nothing more than paranoia.

“Where were we then?” A sly grin flashed across Dad’s face. “Oh! That’s right, I still have two more questions.”

Tilting my head and giving Dad my most intimidating death glare, I defiantly held up a single finger. He had one question remaining, not two, and he knew it. He was just trying to be a trickster.

Judging by Dad’s hearty laugh, my death glare had not been extremely effective. He probably thought it was cute, which seemed to be a common reaction to my annoyed expressions. Maybe I’d have to practice in front of the mirror until I figured out how to make a truly fear-inspiring face, although that would likely be a fruitless endeavor. I wasn’t a physically intimidating person, and a well-practiced glare wasn’t going to change that.

“Alright, alright.” Dad held up his hands in surrender. “One question left. What was I going to ask?” He scratched his chin. “Oh, I remember. It’s either the blanket or the slippers,” Dad said, studying me carefully in an effort to detect any changes in my facial expression. However, all he saw was my stoic poker face. Transforming into Johanna hadn’t entirely destroyed my competitiveness. I was eager to win.

“Is it your blanket?” Dad asked his final question, his voice brimming with hopefulness. He wanted to claim victory just as much as I did.

A quiet sigh escaped my mouth, and my lips involuntarily revealed a pout. Even if I wanted to cheat and claim that I’d chosen my slippers, which I would never do, my initial reaction to Dad’s final guess was damning. Still frowning, I nodded my head ever-so-slightly. I’d picked my blanket, and Dad had read me like a book. Was I that predictable?

“Wooo!” Dad cheered, basking in his victory. A wide grin on his face, he extended his fist toward the ceiling in a triumphant pose. “Great game! That was close, but you can’t fool your old man. I know you better than that.”

The whole display caused me to roll my eyes. I guess Dad was just smarter than me. Oh well. I was okay with that. In my time as Johanna, I’d come to realize that I wasn’t the smartest person on Earth.

“Hey,” Dad nudged me on the shoulder, as he still wore his joyous grin. “Turn that frown upside down, little Angel.”

I blushed at the new nickname, but did my best to fight off a grin of my own.

“You aren’t allowed to go to sleep angry. One smile, and we’ll call it a night.”

With a silent sigh, I allowed the smile to spread across my face. The game had been fun, and - although I was a bit sad over the result - I didn’t want to be a sore loser.

“There we go!” Dad chuckled, reaching over to grasp me by my shoulders and lift me to my feet. “Let’s get you to bed. The fire’s about to die, and you’ve had a big day.”

Once I was standing, Dad wrapped me into a tight, wordless hug. Automatically, I returned the hug and closed my eyes, pressing my head against his chest and silently wishing that this beautiful moment would last forever. While my eyes were still closed, Dad leaned down and placed a loving kiss on my forehead, his five o’clock shadow tickling against my skin.

“Johanna,” Dad began to say, in his softest voice, “I’m so proud-”

Without warning, his caring words were interrupted by the jarring sound of shattering glass. It was the unmistakable crash of a broken window.

I let out a silent gasp and my eyes shot wide open, as I spun toward the source of the commotion. Glass lay strewn over our living room’s ornate Persian rug. The large window, which once looked out toward the street, was nothing more than a gaping hole. The storm’s waxing winds whistled through the paneless opening, as two familiar figures vaulted over the windowsill. Their combat boots tracked mud onto the grey rug.

Clad in black, Jarvis and Tina prowled toward us like a pair of tigers, stalking their prey. Both of them carried aluminum baseball bats, which shined brightly in the fleeting firelight. On their faces were sadistic, remorseless smiles, as their lips peeled back to reveal glinting teeth.

No, no, no I whispered silently. If I could speak, the words would have come in a pathetic, pleading tone.

Desperate for an escape, my eyes darted around the living room. Unfortunately, Jarvis and Tina were already closing in toward us, and had cut off all possible escape routes. Dad and I were cornered, our backs to the fireplace. Despite the warmth provided by my fluffy slippers and calming blanket, my whole body trembled.

“Get behind me,” Dad ordered in a low, commanding voice, like that of a great General on the eve of battle.

With scurrying steps, I obeyed. Moving behind Dad, I stood on the hearthstone step just shy of the fireplace. Its final wave of heat tickled at my legs as its log burnt to ash. Nervously licking my chapped lips, I peered over his shoulder at our approaching assailants. One thought occupied my mind, as it raced with worry: I was going to die. We were going to die. I had to do something...anything. I began hyperventilating, drawing shallow, constrained breaths. I wish I could scream, but I couldn’t. Even if I’d been physically capable of screaming, I wouldn’t be able to manage it. I was too overwhelmed.

I had to focus. As the two goons grew ever closer, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, filling my lungs with precious oxygen. Panicking wouldn't help me. I had to be calm. Opening my eyes, I exhaled. Okay, that breathing exercise didn't work too well. I was still shaking with nervousness, on the verge of peeing myself. Fortunately, I'd mustered enough self-control to form some sort of emergency reaction.

Fishing my phone from my pajama pocket, I struggled to unlock the passcode with my trembling hands. Opening the keypad, I guided my shaking index finger to each of the necessary digits. 9-1-1, I typed, desperately hoping that I'd dialed the number correctly. Right after I hit the small 'Call' icon, my phone slipped out of my trembling fingers and fell harshly to the stone below me. I looked down in alarm. Emergency services still responded to ghost calls...right? Either way, help would certainly arrive too late. Dad and I were going to have to fend for ourselves.

Dad's mind was following the same train of thought. With a livid expression on his face, he bent down to lift our double-pointed iron fireplace poker from its stand, brandishing it like a spear as he stared down the two tormentors. They circled us like pack hunters, holding their bats at the ready.

"Turns out, your cop friends care more about a little fire at Cheran than your pathetic life," Tina snarled at me, flaring her nostrils as she spoke.

"Yeah, we're gonna kill you," Jarvis added with a sneer, followed by a hollow laugh.

"You don't have to do this, kids," Dad said in a stern, grave tone. "You're young, you've got a lot to live for. Don't throw it all away over one bad decision."

"A lot to live for?" Tina glared. "Your bitchy daughter took everything from us. Everything." Her pitch rose slowly, until she was practically screaming. "I was the Queen! I remember it!" Each sentence came out of her throat with a screech. "I was the Queen! I remember all of it! You took it all away! You fucking bitch!"

"Julie!" Dad shouted out my mother's name, in his loud, bellowing voice. Perhaps she would hear us, in her bed upstairs. Both she and Megan were fairly heavy sleepers, but I made a silent prayer that they heard Dad's plea. "Call the pol-"

Before Dad could finish his instructions, Jarvis charged. The sturdily built bully swung his bat as he approached, forcing Dad to dodge toward his right and prepare a counter-attack. Unfortunately, Dad wasn't quite quick enough. The metal bat caught Dad's shoulder, drawing an angry grunt from my father, just as he thrust his fire poker in reply. The poker's sharp iron tip struck a glancing blow against Jarvis' abdomen.

The brute let out a howl of agony, clutching at his stomach. With a guttural snarl, Jarvis bared his teeth and charged Dad, tackling him to the ground. On the middle of the living room floor, the two of them grappled, consumed by a life-or-death struggle.

Dad was slightly taller than Jarvis, but the hulking bully had the build of a linebacker, and probably outweighed Dad by twenty pounds.

While they battled, I was still standing petrified near the fireplace, my hands clasped fearfully near my chest as I silently wished that my father would prevail. I was so occupied with watching the two men fight, I'd entirely forgotten about Tina...until her metal baseball bat collided with the side of my head.

The world went dark.

I dreamt that I was floating on top of a cloud for hours on end, soaring through the sky. Then, like Icarus, I began tumbling toward the ground. Falling, falling, falling for an eternity.

My eyes shot open, and I gasped for air. In my ears, the only noise I heard was a high, sharp ring, which caused my entire head to throb. A massive weight sat on my chest, and a constricting force blocked my throat. I could sense that someone was on top of me, pinning me to the ground...suffocating me. A pair of strong, forceful hands were grasping my throat, cutting off my air supply. Unfortunately, I couldn't see my assailant. All my eyes could decipher was a blurry outline of a person, as faint light danced over their face.

Suddenly, all of the recent events came rushing back to me. It was Tina. She was kneeling on top of my lungs, strangling me to death with her hands. How long had I been unconscious? It couldn't have been more than a matter of seconds, but it had seemed like forever. One thing was certain: if I didn't act soon, I'd be dead. I brought my small fingers to my neck, desperately trying to claw her hands from my throat. I needed to breathe. I needed air...more than anything else on Earth. I could feel myself slipping away. I scratched at her wrists, hoping that I dug deep enough to cut an artery.

Unfortunately, I still couldn't see very much, just a blurry outline of that evil, conniving lunatic. I lashed out toward her eyes, but I couldn't seem to reach her face. My arms weren't long enough. I needed a new plan, and I needed one fast.

I was losing energy, and each of my clawing attempts seemed to be less fervent than the last. My initial instinct seemed to be correct: I was going to die.

Please, I mouthed. Please.

I had no idea if Tina responded or not. I couldn't read her lips, and my ears were still ringing like church bells. Why was I even bothering with a plea for compassion? Tina had surrendered her human decency long ago. I needed to stop her. I needed something...anything. That's when I remembered: my blanket! It was an odd garment, but I'd chosen to wear it like a cape. To don the comfy blanket like a cape, Mom had



fastened it in place with a brooch and needle. A thick, inch-long needle with a sharp point.

With all of my remaining strength, I reached toward my upper chest. My fingers danced around in anguish, seeking the brooch. Finally, I found it. The small piece of metal was sitting just above my breasts. With trembling fingers, I unclasped the round brooch. I held it tightly in my fist, with the needle pointing up toward Tina. As my visual field darkened and everything began to fall further out of focus, I thrust the sharp metal upward into Tina's outstretched forearms with a wild stabbing motion.

I wasn't sure how many times I stabbed her. Ten times? Twenty? I only knew one thing for sure: my strategy of desperately stabbing toward Tina had been extremely successful. Her scream was so loud and piercing that I heard it, even with my ringing ears. It was like beautiful music. Her hands retreated from my throat, and I gasped for air, breathing as if I'd never experienced the wonders of oxygen in my life.

I still sat on the ground. I wasn't yet confident in my ability to stand. I'd definitely suffered a fairly serious concussion from the baseball bat, although I could feel some of my senses slowly returning, like snowbirds in spring. Tina's fuzzy figure stopped its distant howling, and collapsed limp to the ground with a dull thud, shaking the floor.

Panting like a dog, I glanced over toward the simultaneous brawl between Dad and Jarvis. I could only barely make out their shapes, given my blurry vision and the faded firelight. From the looks of it, Jarvis was gripping Dad's neck while Dad rained jab-fisted punches straight into Jarvis' exposed face.

The exchange went on for almost a full minute, until Jarvis' grip weakened and his arms fell down to the floor like fallen tree-trunks. Right as Jarvis collapsed, Dad glanced toward me. He probably asked if I was okay, but I didn't hear him speak. Regardless, I nodded slightly, which caused my mind to swirl with dizziness. Emitting a quiet moan, I lowered my pained head back to the ground and laid down, staring at Dad with unfocused eyes.

Dad, still lost in the heat of the moment, turned back toward Jarvis. With unpent anger, he continued to deliver a string of powerful punches to my tormentor's face. Dad held Jarvis by the collar of the massive bully's black t-shirt, thrusting punches forward. Each strike caused Jarvis' head to jerk back with force. I lost count of how many punches Dad threw.

My ears were still ringing, but I managed to decipher two of Dad's angry, distant shouts, as he gripped Jarvis tightly by his now-torn collar: "My", and "Daughter."

With one final punch, Dad let go of Jarvis' collar, letting him fall limp to the floor.

Just as the bane of my existence fell to the ground in a heap, two frantic figures came barreling down the stairs in their nightwear: Mom and Megan. Somewhere during the course of our brawl, they had both been stirred awake. I suppose they acted as quickly as they could, given the circumstances. My vision gradually became higher definition, and I noticed that the smoldering log in the fireplace still hadn't fully burnt out. Although the fight seemed as if it had lasted for hours upon hours, it couldn't have gone on for longer than two or three minutes.

My eyes fluttered once or twice, as my head continued to throb.

When I forced my eyes open, Mom, Dad, and Megan were all kneeling over me, frantic words spurting out of their mouths. I heard the words, but I could only process three of them. "Sweetie", "concussion", and "ambulance". My vision was almost back to normal. Additionally, while my eyes were briefly shut, someone had turned on the lights. The illuminated room presented a gruesome sight. Blinking once again, I eyed the hardwood floor around me, which bore streams of dark red blood, trickling into the deep grooves between each plank of wood. Was it my blood? No. The trail of blood seemed to be coming from Tina, who lay curled in the fetal position, several feet away from me.

I took a deep, calming breath. As the world came into full focus around me, my eyes scanned my family's worried faces. I began to comprehend all of the words that Mom was saying, as she ran her comforting hand through my short hair.

"Oh my God, Johanna! Please be okay," Mom whimpered on her knees, tears welling in her eyes. She grasped my hand tightly in hers, interlocking our fingers as she made her quiet prayers. "Please be okay. Pleeese be okay." Leaning down to my face, she planted a tender kiss on my forehead. As she did, I heard the faint whirr of emergency sirens. Help was near.

With each passing moment, more of my lucidity returned. I'd definitely suffered some sort of concussion, but I was feeling better and better. My head still hurt, but it seemed like the most extreme symptoms were gone. I looked up into my mother's eyes. Mom, I mouthed. Gradually, a smile spread across my lips, as my head's rapid spinning crawled toward a stop.

I'd never seen Mom look so relieved. Although her face had been stricken by panic just moments before, she now wore a smile. A faint, loving smile. Tears of joy meandered down her cheeks as she knelt beside me, whispering soothing words into my ear.

"J...Johanna," Megan stuttered. She stood above me, clutching her shaking arms and surveying the room. "I came as fast as I could. At first, I thought the noises were a

dream or something. I...I'm sorry." Megan shook her head in disappointment, fighting off tears. The whites of her eyes were red. Strained. With a deep, shaky breath, she momentarily collected herself, and knelt beside Mom.

"Just take it easy," Megan instructed me. The advice was probably more for herself than for me, although my heart was still beating incessantly in my chest, causing my eardrums to pound.

"The ambulances are coming any second now. Just stay calm, stay cool. It's all smooth sailing from here. It's like landing a flip. You're halfway in the air, you just let gravity take care of the rest."

Still wearing my reassuring smile, I nodded. My family was here. I was in the clear. Safe. Like my previous nod, this one brought dizziness and a tinge of nausea, but both of those effects were less extreme than before.

My eyes flicking between Mom's face and then Megan's, I noticed that Dad was no longer standing near me. Where was he? I carefully moved my neck until I spotted him. He was kneeling down beside Tina with a first-aid kit, creating some sort of tourniquet for her sliced right wrist. Blood still gushed from her forearm, leaving a trail in its wake. Her eyes were open, just barely, and she appeared to be weeping. Silently, I prayed that she survived her wounds. Although Tina was a terrible human being, at least some of that terribleness was my own fault...and I didn't want to be a killer.

However, that was only half of the story. My desire to see her live went deeper than that. Tina was an objectively bad person, and actively made the world worse. When I was Joseph, my behavior and attitude could have been described similarly. I treated my family as if they were an inconvenience, and I regularly brought other people down with my negativity. I made Tina's childhood hell. Jarvis's, too. They both had good cause to hate me.

Now, though, I'd developed a whole different point of view. Jarvis had destroyed my life, but in that destruction, I rediscovered myself. Admitting my past mistakes and asking for forgiveness was the hardest thing I'd ever done, though my apology had not been accepted. Still, If I could change, so could Tina, and I didn't want to take that opportunity away from her.

The same went for Jarvis, who lay groaning on the floor, about ten feet away. His face was bloodied, but his wounds didn't appear to be fatal. He'd probably end up with one or two scars, though. I took a silent sigh. Would he learn his lesson, or was he too dim to change his ways?

I knew that I often underestimated the intelligence of others. It was a weakness of mine. Even earlier today, I'd underestimated both Tina and Jarvis. I didn't believe that they were capable of creating a plan and setting off a deceptive fire, to draw the police presence away from my house. Despite what I often told myself, Jarvis and Tina weren't complete idiots. Both of them were capable of deep thought. They could change. Would they, though?

If they both survived, it was possible.

Cutting through the howling stormwinds, the emergency sirens grew ever closer. I closed my eyes and squeezed Mom's hand. I'd survived the darkest day in my life. I was alive.

\* \* \*

I stretched my arms, opening my mouth in a wide yawn as I walked through our familiar doorway. My head still ached a bit, but the dull pain was tolerable.

The last twelve hours had passed by in a blur. First, the ambulance had arrived and strapped the three of us to stretchers, whisking us off to the hospital. Both Jarvis and Tina had police escorts, ensuring that they wouldn't be escaping any time soon. The violent pair were in deep trouble. Deep, deep, deep trouble. While I was at the hospital, the cops had asked me a few questions about what happened. They'd also talked to my parents and Megan, and I had no doubt that both Tina and Jarvis would soon be facing serious criminal charges. The kind of charges that put people behind bars for years.

During my overnight hospital stay, I felt like a stray leaf in the wind. Powerless. The hospital's hallways were eerily empty, and reassuring nurses carted me around from room to room, subjecting me to an array of scans. Then, people in scrubs shined lights in my eyes, and asked me questions about my life, for almost a full hour.

By the beautiful grace of the universe, I passed all of the administered scans and tests. According to the doctors, I'd suffered a mild concussion from Tina's baseball bat. Although my head still ached, all of my other symptoms had disappeared. It was a miracle, of sorts. When I first got the concussion, I thought that I was on the verge of death. Well...I suppose I was on the verge of death, due to Tina's strangling. I'd survived, though. I was going to be okay. The thought brought a tear to my eye, which I didn't wipe away. Proudly, I let it fall to our freshly cleaned floor. I assume that Mom had been nervous cleaning while she awaited the results of my CT scan.

Although the doctors determined that I was probably going to be okay, they also decided that I should be observed for the night, due to the late hour and the blunt

nature of my injury. 'Observe' was a generous wording. In truth, they simply wheeled me into a hospital room and left me there. Alone. To their credit, they did give me a little button to press in case I was about to die. Megan and my parents stopped by, but only for a few minutes before the nurses sent them away. Apparently, socializing wasn't good for my recovery. Rather than scary or intimidating, my time at the Saint Paul's United Hospital was best described as 'boring.' I was strictly forbidden from doing anything that involved concentration or thought, so I simply stared at the white hospital ceiling, counting all of the tiny round holes in the ceiling texture. I got to almost 1500 before my eyes flickered shut.

When the morning sun streamed through my hospital room's single window, I was bouncing with energy. I knew that my stay was almost over. Sure enough, they sent me home with instructions to return if I exhibited any symptoms of brain damage. The prospect of possibly losing my intelligence was daunting, but I knew that it wouldn't happen. Aside from the headache, I was feeling fine, and I still remembered everything about my life. Plus, the doctors seemed confident that my brain was intact. I was still sleepy when I returned home, but the world no longer swirled in dizzy circles as I walked. I was going to be A-okay.

"Alright, let's get you up to bed. I don't care how much you just slept, you still need rest." Dad said in a warm, soothing tone as we walked through the front doorway, out of the frightening storm. Picking me up with ease, he held me in his arms and carried me up the stairs. In his scrap with Jarvis, Dad had bruised both his shoulder and his fists. Aside from that, he was relatively unscathed, for which I was eternally grateful. If Dad got hurt trying to save me, I'd feel beyond guilty.

With grace and care, Dad placed me down onto my bed. He smiled at me. It was a warm smile, flickering across his lips like a fireplace. With a strong hand, he brushed the hair out of my eyes, and took a seat on my bed beside me.

"Get some rest," he ordered, "and no video games or TV at all until Wednesday."

I wrinkled my nose, and pouted.

Dad shrugged, and his eyes lit up with amusement. "Those were the doctor's orders," he grinned. "I don't make the rules."

While I hadn't been planning on playing video games tonight, I had been eager to play some Tomb Raider tomorrow, just to pass the time. Spending a whole day bedridden was going to be horrible. How was I going to fend off boredom if I wasn't allowed to use my computer? I bit my lip, deep in thought.

It was Saturday morning...which meant that Clark would be free, before his noon practice. I allowed a slight smile. Maybe my recovery time wasn't going to be boring and dreadful, after all.

Dad put a hand on my forehead, with the hint of a devious grin on his lips. I knew that look: he was about to tell a stupid joke. "You know, you Larsen women sure are headstrong. I guess it really paid off, this time."

I rolled my eyes, and playfully punched him on the shoulder.

"Alright, I'll leave you alone, now. Dad leaned down and gave me a parting kiss on the forehead. "I love you," he added.

I love you, too, I mouthed.

# CHAPTER 23

## *Epilogue - Six Months Later*

I compulsively rubbed my bare arm and tried to ignore the tingling sensation coursing from the top of my head down to my painted toes. Coach Wendt eyed each of us like a lioness as we stood shoulder-to-shoulder in a small circle on the hard gymnasium floor. She looked fierce. Commanding. Around us, the crowd cheered for another team that was performing. There were thousands of people in the stands, causing a dull roar. I'd never imagined a cheer competition would have so many attendees, but I did my best to tune all of that out. This was for the final round of the team competition, and the stakes were high. Too high for distractions.

"You know these routines like the back of your hands. You could do this with your eyes closed." Coach's gruff voice cut through the ambient noise, speaking directly to our hearts. Over the past few months, I'd grown used to her candid, raw style. Just hearing her brought me into a state of instant attentiveness.

"Put your hands on your stomachs," she ordered and we complied, sharing silent, nervous smiles with each other. We were all curious to see where this was going.

"Do you feel them? The butterflies?"

My hands over my stomach, I wasn't sure if I felt butterflies. My hand was trembling and my whole body shaking with excitement. I suppose it was butterfly-like.

Glancing to my left, I saw that Sarah also had her hands placed carefully over her stomach and we both wore energetic grins. Like me, her nails were painted glossy white and green in an alternating pattern. Those were our school colors. All of the cheer team had a sleepover last night at our house and we decided to paint all of our nails in the same color and style. Although our toes were out of view, nestled inside our sneakers, they too were polished with our colors.

“Don’t try to stop the butterflies. Just let them fly,” Coach continued. “Everyone, close your eyes.”

I shut my eyes and saw nothing but blackness. I opened my eyes a tiny bit, just so I could see if anyone else had theirs open. Sure enough, Megan hadn’t closed hers either, and we shared a mischievous grin from across the circle.

“Now breathe in for ten seconds. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten.” My lungs filled with air until they were at capacity.

“And breathe out.” Around the circle, we unleashed a chorus of high sighs as the air left our bodies, and with it our worries fled. For some reason, I was no longer trembling. My body wasn’t tingling, and all of my muscles felt relaxed yet prepared.

“Open your eyes. You’re going to go out there and do what you do every day.” Coach looked around the circle, from girl to girl, as she spoke. “This place is no different than our gym back at Cheran.”

She paused and her eyes lingered on me. “I’ve seen each and every one of you tackle challenges greater than this. I’ve seen all of you show more heart, more strength, and more toughness than any team I’ve ever known.” She broke eye contact with me and managed a rare smile.

“Okay, girls. It’s your time to shine. Stand up straight. Breathe deeply. Kick ass. Wildcats on three. One, two three.”

“Wildcats!” We yelled in unison.

With that, we headed onto the stage. The gym was large and designed to host gymnastics events. At its center was a designated stage area, illuminated by shining bright lights and lined with speaker systems. It was daunting. In the past, the only music that accompanied our routine was an old-school radio-stereo that Coach brought to practice. Now, though, we were going to perform on a real stage, for real judges. The platform itself was floored with padded springboard wood, granting much more jumping height than normal. It was all so different from our normal gym. We’d already performed twice on this same floor, but it still felt like a new experience.

As I fought to resist my returning nervousness, I remembered to breathe as deeply as possible and took my position. Our routine was one of the more challenging acts in the competition. Some of the teams performed only basic cheers, but ours was a full-fledged gymnastics routine. As long as we executed well, we were going to be contenders for first place.

When the music began to play, my lean muscles moved with expert precision. Our routine began slowly, with a carefully choreographed series of standard dance moves. The music’s tempo began to pick up, so did our performance. The pace quickened, and



two of my teammates began doing flips across the stage. Flips, cartwheels, ridiculous spins. You name it, we did it with impeccable synchronization and precision.

As the music began to reach its natural conclusion, my heart began to pound against my tight cheer top with excitement. The ultimate test was on its way.

Megan, Sarah, and a third girl prepared to hoist me into the air in a modified Liberty - a small-scale formation where I would be launched in a spin-twist and land in the air, to balance on top of their raised hands. I was one of the lighter girls on the team, so Coach naturally chose me as one of the lucky cheerleaders to go aerial. I trusted Sarah and Megan with my life and we had practiced this ten times per day for the last few months, so I had absolutely no fear.

Sure enough, the maneuver went off without a hitch. They pulled me up by my feet like an elevator and launched me into the air. The world spun before me as I twisted high above their heads, and it seemed like an eternity before I softly landed on their prepared hands. Standing on one leg, I raised my arms in a triumphant pose as two additional girls were lifted up simultaneously on either side of me.

The crowd seemed to be pleased by our performance, partly because almost all of our friends and family were in attendance. Okay, it wasn't exactly like a movie. Most of the crowd didn't burst into a standing ovation, but we did draw a sizeable roar. This hadn't been our first performance of the competition, but it was certainly our most important performance.

Bounding off the stage, we all knew that we had kicked ass. Our faces were alive with glee when we reformed our circle around Coach. Uncharacteristic of her, she appeared to be struggling to keep herself together. She wasn't quite on the verge of crying happy tears like I was, but the waves of emotion coming off of her were undeniable.

"I'm proud of you. Every single one of you. You gave it your all." Coach collected herself as she spoke. "I know that for some of you, this is the last time you'll be here. The last time you'll perform on a stage like this."

My smile was slightly dampened when I made eye contact with Megan. She and Sarah were both seniors, which meant that they wouldn't be on the team next year. They'd be going off to college. They were both leaving the state, as Megan was headed to Yale and Sarah to Northwestern. They'd be leaving me. No more sleepover where we'd paint our toenails white and green. No more late night chats in Megan's room about boys, school, TV shows, and life. No more shopping for clothes and giggling as we tried on all sorts of outfits. It was a chapter of my life...our lives...that was coming

to an abrupt end. I suppose that's the way the world worked, though. We wouldn't value all of Earth's beauty if everything was abundant and eternal.

"Just know that no matter what kind of scores we get, you're a damned good team. You're a damned good group of girls, and you'll all have this moment to remember. Forever. Because this is what happens when you work hard and dedicate your time to a cause. You kick ass."

She paused for dramatic effect before continuing, "It's easy to walk out of this school and lose contact with each other. Life causes us to drift apart sometimes. Just remember that whenever you're down, whenever you need help, you can count on anyone in this circle." Her eyes gleamed once more with rare emotion, and she extended a bare hand into the center of the circle, which was promptly accompanied by every hand on the team.

"One, two, three."

"Wildcats!" We yelled in unison.

As it turned out, Coach's speech was perfectly timed and the judges' table had just finished the final rankings. Our performance was the final act of the competition, so we didn't have too much time to fret about our potential score.

Taking a glance at the table of judges, I involuntarily scratched my raven hair and studied them closely. Over half of the scorers were middle-aged or elderly men with balding hair. They were dressed in ill-fitting patterned suits and plentiful mustaches. Each of them had closely watched teams of teenaged girls perform in short skirts for an entire weekend. I didn't want to use the word 'creepy,' but...why? Why did the competition choose them as judges? I suppose I couldn't blame them. Maybe they were just passionate about cheerleading and wanted to make a positive impact on the community. There I was, being judgmental again. I tried my best to quell those thoughts, but sometimes I failed.

One of the elderly men with a pure white mustache stood up from the table and grabbed a hand-mic, addressing everyone present. In an effort to avoid singling out the teams who performed the worst, only the top five competing schools were announced. I fully expected our team to place first.

The team announced as number five had come all the way down from Roseau, also known as the middle of frickin nowhere. I'd watched them perform, and they weren't bad. I was honestly surprised that Roseau even had a cheer squad. The next couple teams announced were the usual suspects: Duluth East and Prondale in Minneapolis. They were big schools and they were competitive in just about every sport. It wasn't too surprising to see their names on the list, although admittedly I hadn't watched

their performances too carefully. Each time a school's name was announced, their respective fan section erupted in cheers.

"In second place, Cheran High School!" The announcing judge's booming voice declared, as if they were excited for us. The echoing words were met with complete silence. We...lost? Our team stood shoulder-to-shoulder, surprised expressions etched into our faces.

Immediately, I turned toward Megan in shock. Second? How did we get second? We were heads and shoulders above every other team there? How could the judges have docked us any points at all? My stomach twisted itself into the tightest knot imaginable. Second? We got second?

I didn't even process the rest of the announcement. It seemed as if it was happening a mile away, as another team was crowned champions of the competition. We got second...

I was bewildered, but I wasn't angry. There once was a time when a result like this would cause me to yell at people and lash out, but that was another time. Another life.

"Can't win them all," Megan said, pulling me into a reassuring hug. I hugged her back. She was likely more shaken about this than I was. After all, she'd worked for four years to get this stage. We'd put on the most difficult routine, and executed it flawlessly...but it didn't even matter.

Coach glared daggers at the judging table as they wrapped up their announcement and presented the winning team with a trophy. I tuned out the final announcement, and didn't even care about which team won. As far as I was concerned, we were the real winners.

Still, Coach Wendt's jaw was clenched tightly and she looked like she was about to burst. She was the kind of woman that you didn't want to piss off, and I had no doubt that one or more judges were going to get an earful after the ceremony's conclusion.

"Girls," Coach said in a steady, chilling voice. "I'm beyond proud of you." Right as the clapping came to an end and people began filtering out of the gym, Coach made her move and descended upon the judges' table with wrath. There was no yelling or shouting but based on the looks on the judges' faces, they were receiving a tongue-lashing.

She wasn't alone, as her recent fiancé Principal Morris was quick to stand by her side, his bald head bright red with anger. They were an interesting couple, both quirky and fierce in their own right. Both of them were profoundly caring and soft below their hard shells, like loving tortoises. I didn't know the whole story behind what sparked their relationship, but I was pretty sure that they started dating after my

whole incident with the detectives. I suppose that, sometimes, traumatic and troubling events brought people together and revealed peoples' true character. They'd both been so helpful and caring...I wasn't too surprised that they saw beauty in each other.

Realistically, their bickering with the judges wouldn't solve anything. The final scores had come in and we'd lost...nothing was going to change that. Still, the faint sound of their scolding voices brought a grin to my lips.

"Johanna!" I heard a familiar voice call, and turned around to see Clark's head poking out of the dense crowd. Unfortunately, our team had been standing near one of the gym's main exits and it had become a thoroughfare, people streaming by us like a rushing river. He struggled through the mass of moving people and grabbed my hand. With an authoritative grip, he led me out of the gym and away from the crowds. I suppose it was the right decision, as I was blocking traffic.

"You were amazing!" He gripped me in a tight hug. I knew that Clark likely found this competition incredibly boring...at least, I hoped he did. He wasn't looking at other girls, was he? Ugh. I tried to discard that thought from my mind. I had to trust him. That's what I had promised myself.

Either way, I was glad that Clark showed up. I suppose he didn't have a choice, though, after I attended every single one of his football games and even did some cheerleading at a couple of them during a brief spell of tolerable weather. Despite my skimpy cheerleading outfit, he managed to concentrate on the football field, and played incredibly. He was awesome throughout every game...that's just how he was. Apparently, he was going to be one of the top quarterback prospects in the state, if he maintained his current trajectory. I'd have to keep a close eye on him, and make sure that he didn't do anything stupid to ruin his future.

"I can't believe you didn't win. It's such bullshit. What the hell were those judges even looking at? They had one job to do, and couldn't even manage to -"

I stood on my tip-toes, bringing my lips to his to silence him. Even after months of being girlfriend and boyfriend, and sharing thousands of kisses, it never seemed to grow old. His lips were just so soft, and his tongue was so wonderful, caressing mine with tender oscillation.

After our lips parted, we both blushed, instantly aware of our surroundings. Luckily, none of the crowd seemed to notice our moment. They were all caught up in their own worlds, their own lives.

I'd interrupted Clark because I didn't want him to get all worked up about our loss. In my time as Johanna, I learned not to worry about things that I couldn't control. It

led to anxiety, and prevented people from taking meaningful action. Plus, we'd lost a cheerleading tournament. It wasn't the end of the world. At the end of the day, I was happy with our performance and a second place wasn't a terrible finish.

Staring into Clark's handsome green eyes, I mentally replayed our relationship. It all began with that trial for Genghis Khan in History class, and then...well...then it took off. Through my struggles with Jarvis and Tina, our relationship grew. Clark was my rock. After the Loras Stone brought justice, our love was free to blossom into something beautiful. We talked every day, spent hours together, and knew each other on a profound level. We hadn't actually...you know...done 'it' yet, but I suspected it was only a matter of time before we did. I wasn't afraid or anything, I just wasn't ready yet. Although we had confessed our love to each other rather quickly, I didn't want to rush our relationship. I was satisfied with our current pace.

On the parental front, his dad was still skeptical about me. I think he had a hard time swallowing the fact that his son was dating a girl who couldn't talk. I understood where he was coming from, and I was determined to convince him of my worthiness.

Fortunately, I'd won Clark's mom's affection. She even taught me how to knit, which I picked up on very quickly. We ended up knitting cute sweaters for each other a few weeks back, and she seemed thrilled about it. Apparently, Caroline had never really been interested in those home-economic kind of tasks, and I became something of a substitute daughter on that front.

"Oh my God!" Caroline's unmistakeable soprano lofted through the air as she peeled off from the crowd to join us. "They threw you into the air! You're crazy! Why did you agree to do that?!" Her eyebrows were raised high above her light green eyes, and her blonde hair bounced joyously, as it often did.

Since I visited Clark's house about every other day, Caroline and I saw each other constantly. She'd become a fixture in my life. The cheery blonde was undoubtedly my best friend, and we chatted about just about everything under the sun. She hadn't yet found the love of her life, but her dating escapades always made for hilarious stories. She and Olivia were two of the reasons I wasn't too worried about next school year, despite the fact that Sarah and Megan would be off at college. I wouldn't be lonely, in the coming years.

I nodded in response, my lips betraying a sly grin. Caroline hadn't seen any of our cheerleading practices, and I didn't inform her about everything I did on the cheer squad. As a result, my role as a 'flyer' was a giant surprise for her. She probably thought that I'd been very nervous about being flung into the air, too, but I wasn't. Not when some of the people I trusted the most were there to catch me.

Our conversation was short-lived, as my family tracked me down and my parents swarmed me with their concern.

“Johanna Larsen, what on Earth were you thinking?” Mom asked sternly, wrapping me in a quick, tight hug. “You could have broke something! Thank God you’re safe...and you!” Mom spun around to point an accusing finger at Megan, who stood chuckling next to Dad. “You threw her up there like a ragdoll! She’s your sister! Back when I was in high school, cheerleading wasn’t anything like that. Girls weren’t getting thrown into th-”

“Mom,” Megan rolled her eyes and shot me a snarky smile. “She’s fine. We practiced that move loads of times. There were three of us there to catch her, and she’s basically a feather. Plus, she had fun. Didn’t you?”

I nodded my head vigorously and gave Mom the most charming smile I could muster.

Mom hesitated, and she opened her mouth slightly before speaking. I knew exactly what that meant: I’d charmed her into agreement. I was becoming talented at reading people’s emotions and winning them over. Even though Mom always knew exactly what I was up to, she often caved. “Alright. I’m just glad that you’re okay. You’re practicing with mats and stuff, right? I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I nodded once more, and fought the urge to roll my eyes. Ever since I used the Loras Stone, Mom had grown more protective over me. I suppose that it made sense, as she was trying to overcompensate for her perceived failure to protect me from Jarvis and Tina.

Jarvis and Tina. I tried to think about that pair as little as possible, but it was a difficult task. After the late-night showdown, they were kicked out of Cheran High and carted off to the hospital. Later, they had to face a judge and jury, and answer for all of the terror they’d caused.

From what I’d heard, they were sent to two separate ‘Youth Detention Centers’ with spartan accommodations and mediocre schooling. More like a prison and less like a school. I could only imagine Tina - in all of her snooty glory - wasting away in a place like that...would she join a gang and get tatted up? I wasn’t quite certain. Juvie might make them even more bitter, vindictive, and dangerous. I feared the day of their release, which was likely a number of years down the road. The judge hadn’t been particularly forgiving toward them, and charges like Aggravated Assault, Attempted Murder, and Wishing Stone Abuse were far from misdemeanors. They’d be incarcerated for a good chunk of their early adulthood.

Additionally, all of the money that the Duncan family had received while they controlled Saint Paul was seized by the government. The feds didn't take wishing stone abuse lightly, and confiscated funds with glee. As a result, Duncan's family wasn't able to hire a good lawyer and the law came down on the pair of bullies with full force. Thankfully, I didn't have to testify against them in court. Following the advice of their public defenders, they both took plea bargains. Despite the fact that I never saw their wounded faces after that fateful night, the whole experience still left me a bit frazzled.

Even after the symptoms of my concussion faded, I couldn't shake the sense that my life was still in danger. I didn't walk anywhere alone anymore. Even though both of my tormentors were behind bars, their actions had caused me to lose some faith in humanity. Every time I shut off the lights and went to bed, I worried that someone would come crawling through my window with a baseball bat.

Those fears were most pronounced in the first couple months after the attack, and I'd made a great deal of progress since then. Mom forced me to have bi-weekly talks with a trauma therapist, and I'd managed to erase some of my emotional scars. Still, I was more skittish than I was before...but I was working on it. With every passing day, I grew a bit more confident. I had a loving family, caring friends, and a wonderful life ahead of me. I was going to be okay.

"Johanna?" Megan waved a hand in front of my face, brushing away my meandering thoughts. "You and Clark are seeing that new movie tonight, right? The historical one?"

After a moment of hesitation, as I brought myself back to the present, I nodded and added a pleasant smile. The new historical epic about the life of Genghis Khan had just come out, to fantastic reviews. Clark and I decided that we had to see it together, as a reminder of our silly school project. However, my interest in the Mongolian Warlord ran deeper than just the history class' trial. Like my life, his time on Earth had been forever altered by a wishing stone. I mean, how else would some dude with a horse conquer half of the known world? He had to have used a wishing stone, there was no other explanation.

"Yeah, it starts in...oh, we'd better get going." Clark said, glancing at the time on his phone. With that, the round of pleasantries and cordial goodbyes began between Clark and my family. My parents had warmed up to him, although my incidents with Jarvis and Tina meant that Clark had to go above and beyond the call of duty to earn their trust. He'd have to be a perfect gentleman. After all, I was my parents' youngest daughter, and they felt a silly obligation to protect me from all dangers.

After the farewell rituals concluded, Clark grabbed my hand tenderly, engulfing mine with ease.

“Are you excited for the movie?” He asked, giving my hand a gentle squeeze as we made our way through the still-mingling crowd and toward his pickup truck.

I nodded. I was ecstatic. Clark and I were going to spend a beautiful evening together, sharing a Genghis Khan movie together, followed by some co-op video games and late-night gazing at the winking summer stars. It was going to be delightful.

Hopping up into his truck and staring out the window at the vibrant sky, I began to reflect on my own wishing stone experiences. The wishes changed my life. They brought struggle, trauma, and - most importantly - they revealed the love around me. Pure love from my family, cherished love from my friends, and a very special shade of love from Clark.

The stone made me a better person. My family always loved me...I just didn't love them back, and I ignored their emotions. People had offered me love and friendship in the past, but I had shut them down. I had been too caught up in my own life to even care. Now, I was more observant about everything, and more caring toward everyone. It wasn't an easy path, and it certainly wasn't over. However, at the end of the day, I was glad I fell through that locker-room wall and landed beside a wishing stone.

The End