

just
remember.

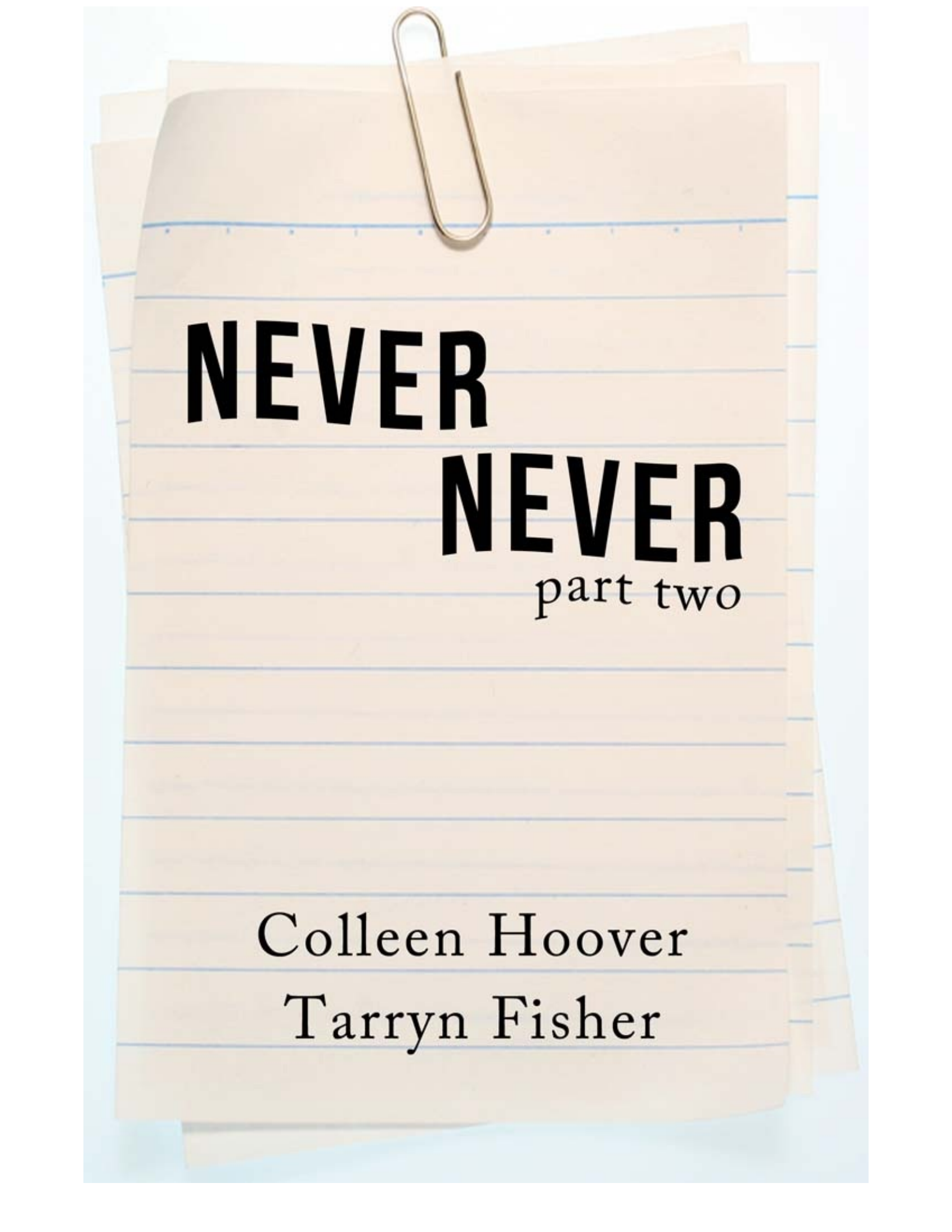
NEVER



part two
NEVER

#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author
Colleen Hoover

New York Times Bestselling Author
Tarryn Fisher



NEVER

NEVER

part two

Colleen Hoover

Tarryn Fisher

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This book is for all of you who love happy ever afters and forgave me for the ending of part one. It was Tarryn's fault.

~Colleen Hoover

This book is for everyone who thinks happy ever afters and Diet Pepsi are stupid.

~Tarryn Fisher



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It starts slowly.

The rain.

A splatter here, a splash there. First on the windshield in front of me and then against the windows surrounding me. The drops begin to sound like thousands of fingertips tapping the top of my car out of unison. *Tap-ta-tap-tap-ta-ta-tap-tap-tap*. The sound is all around me now. It feels like it's coming from inside me, trying to get out. The rain begins to trickle down the windshield, thick enough to mix together in long lines that resemble tears. They slide to the bottom and disappear beyond the glass. I attempt to turn my wipers on, but my car is off.

Why isn't my car on?

I wipe the fog off my window with the palm of my hand to see outside, but the rain is falling so hard now I can't see anything.

Where am I?

I turn around and look in the backseat, but there's no one there. Nothing there. I face forward again.

Think, think, think.

Where was I headed? I must have fallen asleep.

I don't know where I am.

I don't know where "I" am.

I...I...I...

Who am I?

It seems so natural to think thoughts that contain the word *I*. But each of my thoughts are hollow and weightless, because the word "I" is attached to no one. No name, no face. I am...*nothing*.

The hum of an engine steals my attention as a car slows next to mine on the road. Water splashes across the windshield as it passes. I make out taillights as the car slows and then pulls over in front of me.

Reverse lights.

My heart begins to beat in my throat, my fingertips, my temples. The lights atop the car breathe to life. *Red, blue, red, blue*. I watch as someone exits the vehicle. All I can make out is their silhouette as they begin to approach my car. I barely move my neck as they walk toward my passenger door, keeping my eyes trained on them as they reach the window.

A tap.

Tap, tap, tap.

I press the ignition button to give power to the windows—*how did I know how to do that?* I roll the window down.

A cop.

Help, I want to say.

I forgot where I was going, I want to say.

“Silas?”

His voice startles me. It’s loud. He’s trying to compete with the sound of the rain by yelling the word *Silas*.

What does that word mean? *Silas*. Maybe he’s French. Maybe I’m in France and *Silas* is a greeting. Maybe I should say *Silas* in return.

The man clears his throat and then says, “Your car broke down?”

Not French.

I look at the controls on my dash. I force my lips apart so that I can form a word. Instead, I gasp for air, unaware I’ve been holding my breath. When I release the air in my lungs, it comes out shaky...embarrassing. I look back at the officer standing at the window. “No,” I say. My voice scares me. I don’t recognize it.

The officer leans down and motions to my lap. “What you got there?” he asks. “Directions somewhere? You lost?”

I look down at an unfamiliar stack of papers resting on my lap. I push them to the passenger seat, wanting them off me, and I shake my head again. “I, um. I was just...”

My words are interrupted by a ring. A loud ring, coming from inside the car. I follow the sound, moving the papers from the seat to find a cell phone beneath them. I look at the caller ID. *Janette*.

I don’t know a Janette.

“You need to get off the side of the road, son,” the officer says, taking a step back. I push a button on the side of the phone to get it to silence. “Go on ahead and get back to the school. Big game tonight.”

Big game. School.

Why does neither seem familiar?

I nod.

“Rain should let up soon,” he adds. He taps the roof of my car as if he’s sending me off. I nod again and put my finger on the button that controls the windows. “Tell your father to save me a seat tonight.”

I nod again. *My father.*

The officer stares at me for a few seconds longer, a quizzical look on his face. He finally shakes his head and then begins to retreat back to his car.

I look down at the phone. Just as I’m about to hit a button, it begins ringing again.

Janette.

Whoever Janette is, she really wants someone to answer this phone. I swipe the screen and bring it to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Did you find her?” I don’t recognize the voice on the phone. I wait a few seconds before responding, hoping it clicks. “Silas? Hello?”

She just said the same word the officer said. *Silas*. Except she said it like a name.

My name?

“What?” I say into the phone, confused by everything.

“Did you find her?” There’s panic in her voice.

Did I find her? Who am I supposed to be looking for? I turn around and check the back seat once more, even though I know there isn't anyone in the car with me. I face forward again, not sure how to respond to the question just posed to me. "Did I find her?" I ask, repeating the question. "I...did you find her?"

A groan comes from Janette. "Why would I be calling you if I found her?"

I pull the phone away from my ear and look at it. I'm so confused. I press it against my ear again.

"No," I say. "I didn't find her."

Maybe this girl is my little sister. She sounds young. Younger than me. Maybe she lost her dog and I was out looking for her? Maybe I hydroplaned in the rain and hit my head.

"Silas, this isn't like her," Janette says. "She would tell me if she wasn't going to come home or show up for school today."

Okay, I guess we're not talking about a dog here. And the fact that I'm pretty sure we're discussing a person who is apparently missing makes me really uncomfortable, considering I'm not even sure who I am right now. I need to hang up before I say something wrong. Something incriminating.

"Janette, I have to go. I'll keep looking." I press end and set the phone down on the seat next to me. The papers that were sitting on my lap catch my eye. I reach over and grab for them. The pages are stapled together, so I flip to the front page. It's a letter, addressed to me and some other guy named Charlie.

Charlie and Silas,

If you don't know why you're reading this, then you've forgotten everything.

What the hell? The first sentence isn't what I was expecting to read. I don't know what I was expecting to read.

You recognize no one, not even yourselves. Please don't panic, and read this letter in its entirety.

It's a little late for the *don't panic* part.

We aren't sure what happened, but we're afraid if we don't write it down, it might happen again. At least with everything written down and left in more than one place, we'll be more prepared if it does happen again. On the following pages, you'll find all the information we know. Maybe it will help in some way.

-Charlie and Silas.

I don't immediately flip to the next page. I drop the pages in my lap and bring my hands to my face. I rub them up and down, up and down. I glance in the rearview mirror and then immediately look away when I don't recognize the eyes staring back at me.

This can't be happening.

I squeeze my eyes shut and bring my fingers to the bridge of my nose. I wait for myself to wake up. This is a dream, and I need to wake up.

A car passes, and more water is tossed across the windshield. I watch as it trickles down again and disappears beneath the hood.

I can't be dreaming. Everything is too vivid, too detailed to be a dream. Dreams are splotchy, and they don't flow from one moment to the next like everything is doing right now.

I pick the pages up again, and with each sentence it becomes harder to read. My hands become increasingly unsteady. My mind is all over the place as I scan over the next page. I find out Silas is definitely my name and that Charlie is actually the name of a girl. I wonder if she's the girl who is missing. I continue to read, even though I can't suspend disbelief long enough to accept the words I'm reading. And I don't know why I won't allow myself to believe it, because everything I'm reading certainly coincides with the fact that I have no recollection of any of it. It's just that if I were to suspend my disbelief, I would be admitting that this is possible. That according to what I'm reading, I've just lost my memory for the fourth time in a row.

My breathing is almost as erratic as the rain falling against the roof of my car. I bring my left hand up to the back of my neck and squeeze as I read the last paragraph. One I apparently just wrote a matter of ten minutes ago.

-Charlie got into a cab on Bourbon Street last night and no one has seen her since. She doesn't know about this letter. Find her. The first thing you need to do is find her. Please.

The last few words of the letter are scrawled, barely legible, like I was running out of time when I wrote it. I set the letter down on the seat, contemplating everything I've just learned. The information is racing in my mind faster than my heart is beating in my chest. I can feel the onset of a panic attack coming, or maybe a breakdown. I grip the steering wheel with both hands and breathe in and out through my nose. I don't know how I know that's supposed to produce a calming effect. At first, it doesn't seem to be working, but I sit like this for several minutes, thinking about everything I just learned. *Bourbon Street, Charlie, my brother, The Shrimp, the tarot reading, the tattoos, my penchant for photography.* Why does none of it seem familiar? This has to be a joke. This has to be referring to someone else. I can't be Silas. If I were Silas, I would *feel* like I'm him. I wouldn't feel this complete separation from the person I'm supposed to be.

I grab my phone again and open up the camera app. I lean forward and reach behind me, pulling my shirt forward and over my head. I hold the camera behind me and snap a picture of my back, then pull my shirt back into place and look at the phone.

Pearls.

A strand of black pearls is tattooed on my back, just like the letter said.

"Shit," I whisper, staring down at the picture.

My stomach. I think I'm about to be...

I open up the car door just in time. The contents of whatever I had for breakfast are now on the ground at my feet. My clothes are being soaked as I stand here, waiting to get sick again. When I think the worst is over, I climb back into the car.

I look at the clock, and it reads 11:11 am.

I'm still not sure what to believe, but the more time that passes without recollection, the more I begin to entertain the idea that I may have just a little over forty-seven hours before this happens again.

I reach across the seat and open my glove box. I don't know what I'm looking for, but sitting here doing nothing seems like a waste of time. I pull out the contents, tossing aside vehicle and insurance information. I find an envelope with our names written across it. *A duplicate of everything I just read.* I continue to flip through the papers until a folded piece of paper tucked at the very bottom of the glove box steals my attention. It has my name written across the top of it. I open it, first reading the signature at the bottom. It's a letter from Charlie. I start back at the top of the page and begin reading.

Dear Silas,

This is not a love note. Okay? No matter how much you try to convince yourself that it is—it's not. Because I'm not that type of girl. I hate those girls, always so lovesick and disgusting. Ew.

Anyway, this is the anti-love note. For instance, I do not love the way you brought me orange juice and medicine last week when I was sick. And what was with that card? You hope I feel better and you love me? Pfft.

And I definitely do not love the way you pretend that you can dance when you really look like a malfunctioning robot. It's not adorable and it doesn't make me laugh at all.

Oh, and when you kiss me and pull away to tell me I'm pretty? Don't like that one damn bit. Why can't you just be like other guys who ignore their girlfriends? It's so unfair that I have to deal with this.

And speaking of how you do everything wrong, remember when I hurt my back during cheerleading practice? And you skipped David's party to rub Biofreeze on my back and watched Pretty Woman with me? It was a clear sign of how needy and selfish you can really be. How dare you, Silas!

I will also no longer tolerate the things you say about me around our friends. When Abby made fun of my outfit that day and you told her that I could wear a plastic bag and make it look couture, it was way out of line. And it was even more out of line when you drove Janette to the eye doctor when she kept getting headaches. You need to get a grip. All of this caring and consideration is so unattractive.

So I am here to tell you that I absolutely do not love you more than any human on this planet. And that it's not butterflies I feel every time you walk into a room, but sick, one-winged, drunken moths. Also, you're very, very unattractive. I flinch every time I see your unblemished skin and think—Oh my god, that kid would be so much more attractive with some pimples and crooked teeth. Yeah, you're gross, Silas.

Not in love.

Not at all.

Never Never.

Charlie.

I stare at the way she signed off and read those words through a few more times.

Not in love.

Not at all.

Never Never.

Charlie

I flip the note over, hoping to see a date. There's nothing to indicate when it was written. If this girl wrote me letters like this, then how could everything I just read in my notes about the current state of our relationship even be true? I'm obviously in love with her. Or at least I *was* in love with her.

What happened to us?

What happened to *her*?

I fold the letter up and put it back where I found it. The first place I go is to the address listed on the paper for Charlie's house. If I don't find her there, maybe I can get more information from her mother, or from anything I can find that we might have overlooked before.

The garage door is shut when I pull into her driveway. I can't tell if anyone is home. The place is grungy. Someone's trashcan sits sideways next to the curb, trash spilling out onto the street. A cat is pawing at the bag. When I step out of the car, the cat dashes down the street. I look around as I make my way to the front door. No one is around, the neighbor's windows and doors are all shut tight. I knock several times, but no one answers.

I look around one last time before I turn the knob. *Unlocked*. I quietly push the door open.

In the letters we wrote to ourselves, we mention Charlie's attic a few times, so that's the first place I search for. *Charlie's attic*. I'm meeting the attic before I meet the girl. One of the doors is open in the hallway. I walk in and find the bedroom empty. Two beds—this must be where Charlie and her sister sleep.

I walk to the closet and look up at the ceiling, finding the entrance to the attic. I push clothes aside, and a smell fills my nose. Her smell? Floral. It smells familiar, but that's crazy, right? If I can't remember her, I can't possibly remember her smell. I use the closet shelves as stairs and make my way up.

The only light inside the attic comes from the window on the other side of the room. It's enough to illuminate where I'm going, but not by much, so I pull out my phone and open the flashlight app.

I pause and stare down at the open app on my phone. *How did I know that was there?* I wish there were rhyme or reason to why we remember some things and not others. I try to find a common link in the memories but come up completely empty.

I have to hunch over because the ceiling is too low for me to stand upright. I continue across the attic, toward a makeshift sitting area on the far side of the room. There's a pile of blankets lined with pillows.

She actually sleeps up here?

I shudder trying to imagine anyone willingly spending time in a place this isolated. She must be a loner.

I have to bend over more to avoid hitting my head on the rafters. When I reach the area she's made up for herself, I look around. There are stacks of books beside the pillows. Some of the books she uses as tables, topped with picture frames.

Dozens of books. I wonder if she's read them all, or if she just needs them for comfort. Maybe she uses them as an escape from her real life. From the looks of this place, I don't blame her.

I bend down and pick one up. The cover is dark, of a house and a girl, merging together as one. It's creepy. I can't imagine sitting up here alone, reading books like this in the dark.

I set the book down where I found it, and my attention falls on a cedar chest pushed up against the wall. It looks heavy and old, like maybe it's something that's been passed down in her family. I walk over to it and open the lid. Inside, there are several books, all with blank covers. I pick up the top one and open it.

January 7th-July 15th, 2011.

I flip through the pages and see that it's a journal. In the box beneath this one, there are at least five more.

She must love to write.

I look around, lifting pillows and blankets, searching for something to put the journals in. If I want to find this girl, I need to know where she frequents. Places she might be, people she might know. Journals are the perfect way to find out that information.

I find an empty, worn backpack on the floor a few feet away, so I grab it and stuff all the journals inside. I begin pushing things aside, shaking out books, looking around for anything and everything that might help me. I find several letters in various places, a few stacks of pictures, random sticky notes. I take everything I can fit into the backpack and make my way back to the attic opening. I know there are also a few things in the bedroom at my own house, so I'll go there next and sort through it all as fast as I can.

When I reach the opening, I drop the backpack through the attic hole first. It hits the ground with a loud thud and I flinch, knowing I should be quieter. I begin to descend the shelves one by one, trying to imagine Charlie making the journey up and down these makeshift stairs every night. Her life must be pretty bad if she escapes to the attic by choice. When I make it to the bottom, I grab the backpack and stand up straight. I pull it over my shoulder and start toward the door.

I freeze.

I'm not sure what to do, because the officer who tapped on my window earlier is now staring straight at me.

Is being inside my girlfriend's house illegal?

A woman appears in the doorway behind the officer. Her eyes are frantic and they're lined with mascara—like she just woke up. Her hair is wild, and even from several feet away, the scent of alcohol finds its way across the room.

"I told you he was up there!" she yells, pointing at me. "I warned him just this morning to stay off my property, and he's back again!"

This morning?

Great. Wish I had informed myself of that fact in the letter.

"Silas," the officer says. "You mind coming outside with me?"

I nod and proceed cautiously toward them. It doesn't seem like I've done anything wrong, since he's only asking me to speak with him. If I did anything wrong, he would have immediately read me my rights.

"He knows he's not supposed to be here, Grant!" the woman yells, walking backward down the hall, toward the living room. "He knows this, but he keeps coming back! He's just trying to get a rise out of me!"

This woman hates me. A lot. And not knowing why makes it hard not to just apologize for whatever the hell I did to her.

"Laura," he says. "I'll have a talk with Silas outside, but you need to calm down and move aside so that I can do that."

She steps to the side and glares at me as we pass her. "You get away with everything, just like your daddy," she says. I look away from her so she won't see the confusion on my face, and I follow Officer Grant outside, clutching the backpack over my shoulder.

Luckily the rain has let up. We keep walking until we're standing next to my car. He turns to face me, and I have no idea if I'll be able to answer the questions he's about to throw at me, but hopefully they aren't too specific.

"Why are you not at school, Silas?"

I purse my lips together and think about the answer to that. "I, um..." I look over his shoulder at a

passing car. "I'm looking for Charlie."

I don't know if I should have said that. Surely if the cops weren't supposed to know she was missing, I would have clarified that in the letter. But the letter only stated that I needed to do whatever I could to find her, and reporting her missing seems like it would be the first step.

"What do you mean you're looking for her? Why isn't she at school?"

I shrug. "I don't know. She hasn't called, her sister hasn't heard from her, she didn't show up for school today." I throw a hand behind me in the direction of the house. "Her own mother is obviously too drunk to notice she's missing, so I thought I'd try to find her myself."

He tilts his head, more out of curiosity than concern. "Who was the last person to see her? And when?"

I swallow as I shift uncomfortably on my feet, trying to recall what was written about last night in the letter. "Me. Last night. We got into an argument and she refused to ride home with me."

Officer Grant motions for someone behind me to come toward us. I turn around, and Charlie's mother is standing in the open doorway. She crosses the threshold and makes her way out to the yard.

"Laura, do you know where your daughter is?"

She rolls her eyes. "She's at school where she's supposed to be."

"She is not," I interject.

Officer Grant keeps his eyes trained on Laura. "Did Charlie come home last night?"

Laura glances at me and then looks back at the officer. "Of course she did," she says. Her voice tapers off at the end like she's not sure.

"She's lying," I blurt out.

Officer Grant holds up a hand to hush me, still directing his questions at Laura. "What time did she come home?"

I can see the confusion wash over Laura's face. She shrugs. "I grounded her for skipping school this week. So she was up in her attic, I guess."

I roll my eyes. "She wasn't even home!" I say, raising my voice. "This woman was obviously too drunk to know if her own daughter was even inside the house!"

She closes the distance between us and begins pounding her fists against my arms and chest. "Get off my property, you son of a bitch!" she screams.

The officer grabs her by the arms and motions his eyes to my truck. "For the last time, Nash. Go back to school."

Laura is thrashing in his arms, trying to break free. She's not even fazing him as he keeps her in a tight grip. This seems so normal to him; it makes me wonder if she's called the cops on me before.

"But...what about Charlie?" I'm confused as to why no one else seems to be concerned about her. Especially her own mother.

"Like her mother said, she's probably at school," he says. "At any rate, she'll show up to the game tonight. We'll talk there."

I nod, but I know good and well I'm not going back to the school. I'm taking my bag of Charlie's secrets and I'm going straight to my house to find more.



The first thing I do when I walk through the door to my home is pause. None of it looks familiar, not even the pictures on the walls. I wait for a few seconds, letting everything sink in. I could search the house or browse the pictures, but I've probably already done that. I'm on a time crunch, and if I want to figure out what happened to Charlie—what happened to *us*—I need to keep focused on the things we haven't wasted time doing before.

I find my bedroom and walk straight to the closet—to the shelf that contains all the other stuff we've collected. I dump everything out onto my bed, including the contents of the duffel bag. Sifting through it all, I try to figure out where to begin. There's so much stuff. I grab a pen so I can make notes of anything I find that might be of use if I end up forgetting this all over again.

I know a lot of things about my relationship with Charlie as of late, but that seems to be it. I know almost nothing about how we got together or how our families were torn apart. I don't know if any of that is even a factor in what's happened to us, but I feel like the best place to start is from the beginning.

I grab one of the older-looking notes addressed to Charlie—something I wrote myself. It's dated over four years ago and is just one of the many letters I grabbed from her attic. Maybe reading something from my point of view will help me figure out what type of person I am, even if this letter is over four years old.

I sit down on the bed and lean against my headboard, and I begin to read.

Charlie,

Can you recall a single time we went on vacation without each other? I've been thinking about that today. About how it's never just my immediate family and me. It's always both sets of our parents, Landon, Janette, you, and me.

One big happy family.

I'm not sure we've ever spent a holiday apart, either. Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving. We've always shared them together, either at our house or yours. Maybe that's why I've never felt like it's just been my little brother and me. I've always felt like I had a brother and two sisters. And I can't imagine not feeling that way—like you're part of my family.

But I'm scared that I've ruined that. And I don't even know what to say to you, because I don't want to apologize for kissing you last night. I know I should regret it, and I know I should be doing whatever I can to make up for the fact that I might have officially ruined our friendship, but I don't regret it. I've wanted to make that mistake for a long time now.

I've been trying to figure out when my feelings for you changed, but I realized tonight that they haven't changed. My feelings for you as my best friend haven't changed at all—they've just evolved.

Yes, I love you, but now I'm in love with you. And instead of looking at you like you're just my best friend, now you're my best friend who I want to kiss.

And yes, I've loved you like a brother loves his sister. But now I love you like a guy loves a girl.

So despite that kiss, I promise nothing has changed between us. It's just become something more. Something so much better.

Last night, when you were lying next to me on this bed, looking up at me in breathless laughter, I couldn't help myself. So many times you've taken my breath away or made it feel like my heart was trapped inside my stomach. But last night was more than any fourteen-year-old boy could handle. So I took your face in my hands and I kissed you, just like I've been dreaming of doing for over a year now.

Lately, when I'm around you, I feel too drunk to speak to you. And I've never even tasted alcohol before, but I'm sure kissing you is what being drunk feels like. If that's the case, I'm already worried for my sobriety because I can see myself becoming addicted to kissing you.

I haven't heard from you since the moment you pulled yourself out from under me and walked straight out of my bedroom last night, so I'm beginning to worry that you don't remember that kiss like I do. You haven't answered your phone. You haven't responded to my texts. So I'm writing you this letter in case you need to be reminded of how you really feel about me. Because it seems like you're trying to forget.

Please don't forget, Charlie.

Never allow your stubbornness to talk you into believing that our kiss was wrong.

Never forget how right it felt when my lips finally touched yours.

Never stop needing me to kiss you like that again.

Never forget the way you pulled closer—wanting it to feel like my heart was beating inside your chest.

Never stop me from kissing you in the future when one of your laughs makes me wish I could be a part of you again.

Never stop wanting me to hold you like I finally got to hold you last night.

Never forget that I was your first real kiss. Never forget that you'll be my last.

And never stop loving me between all of them.

Never stop, Charlie.

Never forget.

~Silas

I don't know how long I stare at the letter. Long enough to grow confused as to how it makes me feel. How even though I don't know this girl at all, I somehow believe every word of this letter. And maybe even feel it a little. My pulse begins to quicken, because I've done all I know how to do in the past hour to find her, and the need to know she's okay is imminent.

I'm worried about her.

I need to find her.

I grab another letter for more clues when my phone rings. I pick it up and answer it without looking at the caller ID. There's no point in screening the calls, since I don't know any of the people who would even be calling me.

"Hello?"

"You do realize tonight is one of the most important games of your football career, right? Why in the hell are you not at school?"

The voice is heavy and angry.

Must be my father.

I pull the phone away from my ear and look down at it. I have no idea what to say. I need to read more of these letters before I would know how Silas would normally respond to his father. I need to find out more about these people who seem to know everything about me.

"Hello?" I repeat.

"Silas, I don't know what's gotten—"

"I can't hear you," I say louder. "Hello?"

Before he can speak again, I end the call and drop the phone onto the bed. I grab all of the letters and journals that will fit into the backpack. I rush to leave because I shouldn't be here. Someone might show up who I'm not prepared to interact with yet.

Someone like my father.



Where am I?

That's the first question. Then, *Who am I?*

I shake my head from side to side, like this simple act could jar my brain back into working order. People normally wake up and know who they are...*right?* My heart aches, it's pounding so fast. I'm scared to sit up, afraid of what I'll see when I do.

I'm confused...overwhelmed, so I start to cry. Is it weird to not know who you are, but to understand that you're not a crier? I am so mad at myself for crying that I swipe hard at my tears and sit up, banging my head pretty hard on the metal bars of a bed in the process. I flinch, rubbing my head.

I'm alone. That's good.

I don't know how I'd explain to someone that I have no clue who or where I am. I'm on a bed. In a room. It's hard to tell what kind of room, because it's so dark. No windows. A bulb flickers on the ceiling in a struggling Morse code. It's not strong enough to really illuminate the small room, but I can tell that the floor is made of shiny white tile, and the walls are painted white, bare except for a small television bolted to the wall.

There is a door. I stand up to go to it, but there is a heavy feeling in my stomach as I place my feet one in front of the other. *It's going to be locked, it's going to be locked...*

It's locked.

I feel panic, but I calm myself, tell myself to breathe. I'm shaking as I press my back against the door and look down at my body. I'm wearing a hospital gown, socks. I run my hands over my legs to check how hairy they are—not very. Which means I shaved recently? I have black hair. I pull a piece of it in front of my face to examine it. I don't even know my name. This is crazy. Or maybe I'm crazy. *Yes. Oh my god.* I'm in a mental hospital. That's the only thing that makes sense. I turn around and pound on the door.

"Hello?"

I press my ear against the door and listen for a noise. I can hear the soft humming of something. A generator? An air conditioner? It's some kind of machinery. I get chills.

I run for the bed and fold myself in the corner so I can see the door. I pull my knees up to my chest, breathing hard. I'm scared, but there's nothing I can do but wait.



The strap of my backpack digs into my shoulder as I push myself through the swarm of students in the hallway. I pretend I know what I'm doing—where I'm going—but I know nothing. As far as I'm concerned, this is the first time I've ever stepped foot in this school. The first time I'm seeing these people's faces. They smile at me, bob their heads in greeting. I reciprocate the best I can.

I glance up at the numbers on the lockers, navigating my way through the halls until I find mine. According to everything I wrote, I was here just this morning, searching through this locker, hours ago. I obviously didn't find anything then, so I'm sure I won't find anything now.

When I'm finally facing my locker, I feel the hope that I didn't even know I had evaporate. I guess a part of me was hoping I would find Charlie standing there, laughing at this genius prank she pulled off. I was hopeful that this mess would be over with.

I'm not that lucky, obviously.

I enter the combination on Charlie's locker first and open it in an attempt to find something we missed earlier. As I'm digging through her locker, I can feel someone approach me from behind. I don't want to turn around and have to interact with an unfamiliar face, so I pretend I don't notice they're standing here in hopes that they'll walk away.

"What are you looking for?"

It's a girl's voice. Since I have no idea what Charlie sounds like, I turn around, hoping it's her. Instead, I find someone who isn't Charlie staring back at me. Based on her looks, I assume this is Annika. She fits the description Charlie wrote of our friends in the notes.

Big eyes, dark curly hair, looks at you like she's bored.

"I'm just looking for something," I mutter, turning back to face Charlie's locker. I find no clues whatsoever, so I close the locker and begin to enter the combination on my own lock.

"Amy said Charlie wasn't home this morning when she went to pick her up. Janette didn't even know where she was," Annika says. "Where is she?"

I shrug and pull open my locker, trying to make it inconspicuous that I'm reading the combination from a sheet of paper in my hand. "I don't know. Still haven't heard from her."

Annika stands silently behind me until I'm finished searching my own locker. My phone begins to ring in my pocket. My father is calling again.

"Silas!" someone yells as he passes by. I look up to see a reflection of myself, only younger and not as...*intense. Landon.* "Dad wants you to call him!" he yells, walking backward in the opposite direction.

I hold up my phone, screen facing him, so he knows I'm already aware. He shakes his head with a laugh and disappears down the hall. I want to tell him to come back. I have so many questions I want to ask him, but I know how crazy all of it would sound.

I press a button to ignore the call and I slide it back into my pocket. Annika is still standing here, and I have no idea how to shake her. The old Silas seemed to have an issue with commitment, so I'm hoping Annika wasn't one of his conquests.

The old me is sure making things difficult for the current me.

Right when I begin to tell her I need to get to my last period class, I catch sight of a girl over Annika's shoulder. My eyes lock with hers, and she quickly looks in the other direction. I can tell by the way she slinks away that she must be the girl Charlie referred to as The Shrimp in our notes. Because she really does kind of resemble a shrimp: pinkish skin, light hair, and dark, beady eyes.

"Hey!" I yell.

She keeps moving in the other direction.

I push past Annika and rush after the girl. I yell, "Hey," again, but she just picks up her pace and tucks into herself even more, never turning around. I should know her name. She'd probably stop if I just called out her name. I'm sure if I yelled, "*Hey, Shrimp!*" that wouldn't win me any favors.

What a nickname. Teenagers can be so cruel. I'm embarrassed to be one of them.

Right before her hand reaches the doorknob of a classroom, I slide in front of her, my back against the door. She takes a quick step back, surprised to see me directing my attention at her. She hugs her books to her chest and glances around, but we've reached the end of the hallway and there aren't any students around us.

"What...what do you want?" she asks, her voice a scattered whisper.

"Have you seen Charlie?" The question seems to surprise her more than the fact that I'm talking to her. She immediately distances herself from me with another step.

"What do you mean?" she asks again. "She's not looking for me, is she?" Her voice sounds fearful. *Why would she be afraid of Charlie?*

"Listen," I say, glancing down the hallway to ensure our privacy. I look back at her and can tell she's holding her breath. "I need a favor, but I don't want to talk about it here. Can you meet me after school?"

Again with the surprised expression. She immediately shakes her head no. Her hesitance to want to have anything to do with Charlie or me piques my interest. She either knows something and she's hiding it, or she knows something that she has no idea could help me.

"Just for a few minutes?" I ask. She shakes her head again when someone begins walking in our direction. I cut the conversation short and don't give her a chance to say no again. "Meet me at my locker after class. I have a couple of questions," I say before walking away.

I don't look back at her. I head down the hallway but have no idea where I'm actually going. I should probably go to the athletic department and find my locker there. According to what I read in our notes, there's a letter I haven't read yet in the locker room, along with some pictures.

I round the corner in a hurry and bump into a girl, causing her to drop her purse. I mutter an apology and step around her, continuing down the hallway.

"Silas!" she yells.

I pause.

Crap. I have no idea who she is.

I slowly turn on my heels and she's standing upright, pulling her purse strap higher up on her shoulder. I wait for her to say something else, but she just stares at me. After a few seconds, she throws her palms up in the air. "Well?" she says, frustrated.

I tilt my head in confusion. Is she expecting an apology? "Well...*what?*"

She huffs and folds her arms over her chest. “Did you find my sister?”

Janette. This is Charlie’s sister, Janette. Crap.

I can imagine it’s hard enough searching for a missing person, but trying to search for them when you have no idea who you are, who they are, or who anyone else is kind of feels like shooting for the impossible.

“Not yet,” I tell her. “Still looking. You?”

She takes a step toward me and tucks her chin in. “Don’t you think if I found her I wouldn’t have asked you if *you* found her?”

I take a step back, putting a safe distance between that glare and me.

Okay. So Janette is not a very pleasant person. I should write that in the notes for future reference.

She pulls a phone from her purse. “I’m calling the police,” she says. “I’m really worried about her.”

“I already spoke to the police.”

She darts her eyes up to mine. “When? What did they say?”

“I was at your house. Your mother called the police when she found me in the attic looking for Charlie. I told the officer she’s been missing since last night, but your mother made it sound like I was overreacting, so they didn’t take it seriously.”

Janette groans. “Figures,” she says. “Well, I’m calling them again. I need to go outside to get a better signal. I’ll let you know what they say.” She steps around me to head outside.

Once she’s gone, I head in the direction of where I think the athletic building might be.

“Silas,” someone says from behind me.

Are you kidding me? Can I not make it five feet in this hallway without having to answer to someone?

I turn to face whoever is wasting my time, only to find a girl—or woman, rather—who perfectly matches the description of Avril Ashley.

This is exactly what I *don’t* need right now.

“Can I see you in my office, please?”

I squeeze the back of my neck and shake my head. “I can’t, Avril.”

She reveals nothing of what is going through her head. She stares at me with a stoic expression and then says, “My office. Now.” She turns on her heels and heads down the hall.

I contemplate running in the other direction, but drawing attention to myself won’t do me any favors. I reluctantly follow her until she reaches the door to administration. I follow her past the secretary and into an office. I step aside as she closes the door, but I don’t sit. I’m watching her carefully, and she still hasn’t looked back at me.

She makes her way to the window and stares outside, wrapping her arms around herself. The silence is awkward at best.

“Do you want to explain what happened Friday night?” she asks.

I immediately begin searching my infant memory for what she could be talking about.

Friday, Friday, Friday.

Without my notes in front of me, I come up empty. There’s no way I can remember every detail of what I’ve read in the past two hours.

When I fail to respond, she lets out a soft laugh. “You are unreal,” she says, turning to face me now. Her eyes are red, but so far they’re dry. “What in the world possessed you to punch my father?”

Oh. The diner. The fight with the owner, Brian’s father.

Wait.

I stand up straighter, the hairs prickling up across the skin of my neck. Avril Ashley is Brian Finley’s *sister*? How is that even possible? And why would Charlie and I be involved with them?

“Did it have to do with her?” she asks.

She’s throwing too much at me at once. I grip the back of my neck with my hands again and squeeze away some of the nerves. She doesn’t seem to care that I’m not in the mood to discuss this right now. She takes several quick steps toward me until her finger is poking me in the chest.

“My father was offering her a job, you know. I don’t know what you’re up to, Silas.” She spins and walks back to the window but then throws her hands up in frustration and faces me. “First, you waltz in here three weeks ago and act like Charlie is destroying your life because of her involvement with Brian. You make me feel sorry for you. You even make me feel guilty just for being his sister. And then you use that to manipulate me into kissing you, and once I finally cave, you show up every single day for more. Then you go to my father’s restaurant and attack him, then follow that up by breaking things off with me.” She takes a step back and puts her hand against her forehead. “Do you realize how much trouble I could be in, Silas?” She begins pacing back and forth. “I liked you. I risked my *job* for you. Hell, I risked my relationship with my own *brother* for you.” She stares up at the ceiling, placing her hands on her hips. “I’m an idiot,” she says. “I’m married. I’m a married woman with a degree, and here I am messing around with a student simply because he’s attractive and I’m too damn foolish to know when someone is using me.”

Information overload. I can’t even respond as everything she just said sinks in.

“If you tell anyone about this, I’ll make sure my father presses charges against you,” she says with a threatening glare.

I find my tongue with that comment. “I’ll never tell anyone, Avril. You know that.”

Does she know that? The old me didn’t seem to be very trustworthy.

She keeps her eyes locked with mine for several moments until she seems satisfied with my response. “Leave. And if you need a counselor for the rest of the school year, do us both a favor and transfer schools.”

I put my hand on the doorknob and wait for her to say something else. When she doesn’t, I try and make up for the old Silas. “For what it’s worth...I’m sorry.”

Her lips press into a tight line. She spins and walks angrily to her desk. “Get the hell out of my office, Silas.”

Gladly.



I must have drifted off. I hear a soft beep and then the sound of metal sliding against metal. My eyes snap open and instinctually I press myself harder against the wall. I can't believe I fell asleep. They had to have drugged me.

They. I'm about to find out who *they* are.

The door opens and my breathing gets faster as I squirm against the wall. A foot, plain white tennis shoes, and then...the smiling face of a woman. She comes in humming, kicking the door closed behind her. I relax a little. She looks like a nurse, dressed in pale yellow scrubs. Her hair is dark and pulled back in a low ponytail. She's older, maybe in her forties. For a brief second I wonder how old I am. My hand travels up to my face, as if I could feel my age on my skin.

"Hello," she says cheerfully. She hasn't looked at me yet. She's busying herself with the tray of food.

I wrap my arms tighter around my knees. She sets a tray down on a little table next to the bed and glances up for the first time.

"I brought your lunch. Are you hungry?"

Lunch? I wonder what happened to breakfast.

When I still don't answer, she smiles and lifts the lid off one of the plates as if to tempt me.

"It's spaghetti today," she says. "You like spaghetti."

Today? Like, how many days have I been here? I want to ask her, but my tongue is frozen in fear.

"You're confused. That's okay. You're safe here," she says.

Funny, I don't *feel* safe.

She offers me a paper cup. I stare at it.

"You have to take your meds," she says, shaking the cup. I can hear the rattling of more than one pill inside. *I am being drugged.*

"What's it for?" I startle at the sound of my voice. Raspy. I haven't used it in a while, or I've been screaming a lot.

She smiles again. "The usual, silly." She frowns down at me, suddenly serious. "We know what happens when you don't take your medication, Sammy. You don't want to go down that path again."

Sammy!

I want to cry because I have a name! I reach for the cup. I don't know what she means, but I don't want to go down *that* path again. That path is probably why I'm here.

"Where am I?" I ask. There are three pills: one white, one blue, one brown.

She cocks her head to the side as she hands me a plastic cup of water. “You’re in the Saint Bartholomew hospital. Don’t you remember?”

I stare at her. Am I supposed to? If I ask her questions, she may think I’m crazy, and by the looks of things, I may already be crazy. I don’t want to make things worse, but—

She sighs. “Look, I’m trying really hard with you, kid. But you have to do better this time. We can’t have any more incidents.”

I’m a kid. I cause incidents. That must be why I’m locked up here.

I tilt the cup ’til I feel the pills on my tongue. She hands me the water and I drink it. I’m thirsty.

“Eat up,” she says, clapping her hands together. I pull the tray toward me. I am very hungry.

“Would you like to watch some television?”

I nod. She’s really nice. And I *would* like to watch television. She pulls a remote control out of her pocket and switches it on. The show is about a family. They are all sitting around a table having dinner. *Where is my family?*

I’m starting to feel sleepy again.



It's amazing how much I can learn just by keeping my mouth shut.

Avril and Brian are brother and sister.

Avril is married, yet I somehow still talked her into some sort of jacked-up relationship. And it's fairly new, which I didn't expect. It also seems odd that I would have gone to her for comfort, knowing Charlie and Brian were together.

Based on what I've learned of Silas—or myself—I don't see me wanting to be with anyone but Charlie.

Revenge? Maybe I was just using Avril to get information on Charlie and Brian.

I spend the next ten minutes contemplating what I've learned as I make my way around the campus in search of the athletic department. Everything looks the same: faces, buildings, stupid motivational posters. I finally give up and duck into an empty classroom. I take a seat at a table along the back wall and unzip the backpack filled with my past. I pull out the journals and a few letters, organizing them by date. The majority of the letters are between Charlie and myself, but some of them are from her father, written to her from prison. This makes me sad. There are a few from random people—friends of hers, I'm assuming. Their notes to her annoy me, filled with shallow, teenage angst and bad spelling. I toss them aside, frustrated. I have a feeling whatever is going on with us has little to do with anyone else.

I grab one of the letters Charlie's father wrote to her and read it first.

Dear Peanut,

You remember why I call you that, right? You were so small when you were born. I'd never held a baby before you, and I remember saying to Mom, "She's tiny, just like a little human peanut!"

I miss you, baby girl. I know this must be hard for you. Be strong for your sister and your mom. They're not like us, and they'll need you to figure things out for them for a while. Until I come home. Trust me, I'm working hard to get home to you guys. In the meantime, I've been doing a lot of reading. I even read that book you liked so much. The one with the apple on the cover. Wow! That Edward is...how did you put it...dreamy?

Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about something important. So please listen to me. I know you've known Silas for a very long time. He's a good boy. I don't blame him for what his father did. But you have to stay away from that family, Charlize. I don't trust them. I wish I could explain everything, and I will one day. But please, stay away from the Nashes. Silas is just a pawn in his father's game. I'm afraid they'll use you to get to me. Promise me, Charlize, that you'll stay away from them. I told Mom to use the money in the other account to get by for a while. If you have to, sell her rings. She won't want to, but do it anyway.

I love you,

Dad

I read the letter twice to make sure I don't miss anything. Whatever happened between my father and her father was serious. The man is in prison, and from reading the letter, he doesn't think his sentence is justified. It makes me wonder if my father is really to blame.

I place the letter in a new pile to keep it separate. If I keep all the letters that could mean something in their own pile, then if we lose our memories again, we won't have to waste time reading letters that serve no purpose.

I open up another letter that looks like it's been read a hundred times.

Dear Charlie baby,

You get really angry when you're hungry. You get hangry. It's like you're not even the same person. Can we keep granola bars in your purse or something? It's just that I worry about my balls. The guys are starting to say I'm whipped. And I know what it looks like. I ran like young buck to get you a bucket of chicken yesterday and missed the best part of the game. I missed seeing the greatest comeback in the history of football. All because I'm scared—so in love with you. Maybe I am whipped. You looked really sexy with all that chicken grease on your face. Ripping the meat away with your teeth like a savage. God. I just want to marry you.

Never Never

Silas

I can feel a smile begin to form on my face, and I immediately shake it away. The fact that this girl is somewhere out there and has no idea who or where she is leaves no room for smiles. I grab another letter, this time wanting to read something from her to me.

Dear Silas baby,

Best. Concert. Ever. You may be cuter than Harry Styles, especially when you do that shoulder move and pretend you're smoking a cigar. Thank you for locking us in a broom closet and then keeping your promise. I REALLY liked the broom closet. I hope we can replicate it in our house one day. Just go in there and make out while the kids nap. Except with snacks, because...hangry. Speaking of food, I have to go because the kids I'm babysitting are dumping a jar of pickles down the toilet. Oops! Maybe we should just have

a dog.

Never Never,

Charlie

I like her. I even kind of like myself with her.

A dull ache begins to make its way across my chest. I rub it while staring at her handwriting. It's familiar.

It's sadness. *I remember what it feels like to be sad.*

I read another letter from me to her, hoping to gain more insight into my personality.

Charlie baby,

I missed you today more than I've ever missed you. It was a hard day. It's been a hard summer, actually. The upcoming trial coupled with not being allowed to see you has officially made this the worst year of my life.

And to think it started out so good.

Remember that night I snuck in your window? I remember it vividly, but that might be because I still have it on video and I watch it every single night. But I know that whether or not I had it on video at all, I'd still remember every detail of it. It was the first time we ever spent the night together as a couple, even though I wasn't actually supposed to be spending the night.

But waking up and seeing the sun shining through the window and across your face made it feel like a dream. Like this girl I had been holding in my arms for the past six hours wasn't real. Because life couldn't possibly feel as perfect and as carefree as it did in that moment.

I know you sometimes give me a hard time about how much I loved that night, but I think it's because I never really told you why.

After you fell asleep, I moved the video camera closer to us. I wrapped my arms around you and listened to you breathe until I fell asleep.

Sometimes when I have trouble sleeping, I'll play that video.

I know that's weird, but that's what you love about me. You love how much I love you. Because yes. I love you way too much. More than anyone deserves to be loved. But I can't help it. You make normal love hard. You make me psycho-love you.

One of these days all of this mess will pass. Our families will forget how much they've hurt each other. They'll see the bond we continue to have and they'll be forced to accept it.

Until then, never lose hope. Never stop loving me. Never forget.

Never Never,

Silas.

I squeeze my eyes shut and release a slow breath. How is it possible to miss someone you can't remember?

I set the letters aside and begin to sift through Charlie's journals. I need to find the ones surrounding the events with our fathers. It seems to have been the catalyst in our relationship. I grab one and open it up to a random page.

I hate Annika. Oh my god, she's so stupid.

I flip to a different page. I kind of hate Annika too, but that's not important right now.

Silas baked me a cake for my birthday. It was awful. I think he forgot the eggs. But it was the most beautiful chocolate failure I've ever seen. I was so happy that I didn't even make a gag face when I ate a slice. But, oh god, it was so bad. Best boyfriend ever.

I want to keep reading that one, but I don't. What type of idiot forgets the eggs? I flip a few pages forward.

They took my dad today. I sit up straighter.

They took my dad today. I don't feel anything. Will the feelings come? Or maybe I feel everything. All I can do is sit here and stare at the wall. I feel so helpless, like I should be doing something. Everything has changed, and my chest hurts. Silas keeps coming to the house, but I don't want to see him. I don't want to see anyone. It's not fair. Why have kids if you're just going to do stupid shit and leave them? Dad says it's all a misunderstanding and that the truth will come out, but Mom hasn't stopped crying. And we can't use any of our credit cards, because everything has been frozen. The phone won't stop ringing, and Janette is sitting on her bed, sucking her thumb like when she was little. I just want to die. I hate whoever did this to my family. I can't even—

I flip a few pages forward.

We have to move out of our house. Dad's lawyer told us today. The court is seizing it to pay off his debt. I only know this because I was listening outside of the office door when he told Mom. As soon as he left, she locked herself in her bedroom and hasn't come out in two days. We have to be out of our house in five. I started packing some of our stuff, but I'm not even sure what we're allowed to keep. Or where we are supposed to go. My hair started falling out about a week ago. In big chunks when I brush it and when I'm in the shower. And yesterday, Janette got in trouble at school for scratching a girl on the face when she made fun of the fact our dad is in prison.

I have a couple thousand dollars in my savings account, but seriously, who is going to rent me an apartment? I don't know what to do. I still haven't seen Silas, but he comes every day. I make Janette tell him to go away. I'm so embarrassed. Everyone is talking about us, even my friends. Annika accidentally included me in a group text where they were sending each other prison memes. Come to think of it, I don't think it was an accident. She'd love to get her claws into Silas. Now's her chance. As soon as he realizes what an embarrassment my family has become, he won't want anything to do with me.

Ugh. Was that the type of person I was? Why did she think that? I would never...I don't think I would ever...

Would I...? I close the journal and rub my forehead. I'm getting a headache, and I don't feel any closer to figuring this out. I decide to read one more page.

I miss my house. It's not my house anymore, so can I still say that? I miss what used to be my house. Sometimes I go there, just stand across the street, and remember. I don't even know if life was so great pre-Dad in prison, or if I was just living in a luxurious bubble. At least I didn't feel like this. Like some loser. All Mom does is drink. She doesn't even care about us anymore. And you have to wonder if she ever did, or if we were just fixtures in her glamorous life, Janette and me. Because she only cares about the way she feels now.

I feel bad for Janette. I at least had a real life, with real parents. She's still little. It's going to mess her up because she's not even going to know what it's like to have a whole family. She's so mad all the time. I am too. Yesterday I made fun of this kid until he cried. It felt good. It felt bad too. But like Daddy said, as long as I'm meaner than they are, they can't touch me. I'll just beat them down until they leave me alone.

I saw Silas for a little bit after school. He took me for a burger and then drove me home. It was the first time he'd seen the shit pit we're living in now. I could see the shock on his face. He dropped me off, and then an hour later I heard a mower outside. He went home and picked up a mower and some tools to fix the place up. I wanted to love him for it, but it just embarrassed me.

He pretends he doesn't care about how much my life has changed, but I know he does. He has to. I'm not what I used to be.

My dad has been writing to me. He's said some things, but I don't know what to believe anymore. If he's right...I don't even want to think about it.

I look through the letters from her father. Which one is she talking about? Then I see it. My stomach churns.

Dear Charlize,

I spoke to your mother yesterday. She said you were still seeing Silas. I'm disappointed. I warned you about his family. His father is the reason I'm in prison, yet you continue to love him. Do you realize how much that hurts me?

I know you think you know him, but he's no different from his father. They're a family of snakes. Charlize, please understand that I'm not trying to hurt you. I want to keep you safe from those people, and here I am, locked up behind these bars, unable to take care of my own family. A warning is really all I can give you, and I hope that you heed my words.

We lost everything—our house, our reputation, our family. And they still have everything that was theirs as well as everything that was ours. It's not right. Please, stay away from them. Look what they did to me. To all of us.

Please tell your sister that I love her.

Dad

I feel sympathy for Charlie after reading the letter. A girl torn between a boy who obviously loved her and a father who manipulated her.

I need to visit her father. I find a pen and write down the return address from the letters he's sent to her. I pull out my phone and Google it. The prison is a good two-and-a-half-hour drive from New Orleans.

Two and a half hours one way is a lot of wasted time when I only have forty-eight hours total. And it feels like I've already wasted a lot of that. I make a note of visiting hours and decide if I haven't found Charlie by tomorrow morning, I'll be paying her father a visit. Based on the letters I just read, Charlie is closer to her father than anyone. Well, besides the old Silas. And if *I* don't have a clue where she is, her father is probably one of the few who might. I wonder if he would even agree to meet with me.

I flinch in my seat when the final bell rings, signaling the end of school. I keep the letters separated and put them all neatly inside the backpack. It's the last class period, and I'm hoping The Shrimp will be where I asked her to be.



I'm locked in a room with a boy. The room is tiny and it smells like bleach. Tinier even than the room I was in before I fell asleep. I don't remember waking up and being moved, but here I am, and let's be honest—I don't remember a whole lot lately. He's sitting on the floor with his back against the wall, and his knees spread apart. I watch as he tilts his head back and belts out the chorus to *Oh Cecilia*.

He's pretty hot.

"Oh my god," I say. "If we're going to be locked in here, can you at least sing something good?"

I don't know where that came from. I don't even know this boy. He finishes, punctuating the last word with a really off-key *eh-eh-eh-eh*. It's then that I realize that I not only recognize the song he's singing but also know the lyrics. Things change, and suddenly I'm not the girl anymore. I'm watching the girl watch the boy.

I'm dreaming.

"I'm hungry," she says.

He lifts his hips off the ground and digs around in his pocket. When he pulls out his hand, he's holding a lifesaver.

"You're such a lifesaver," she says, taking it from him. She kicks his foot, and he grins at her.

"How come you're not mad at me?" he asks.

"For what? Ruining our night by making us miss the concert so you could make out with me in a broom closet? Why the hell would I be mad?" She makes a show of slipping the mint between her lips. "Do you think they'll hear us in here when the concert's over?"

"I hope so. Or you'll get really hangry and be mean to me all night."

She laughs, and then they're both smiling at each other like idiots. I can hear the music playing. It's something slower this time. They got locked in here making out. Very cute. I feel envious.

She crawls over to him, and he lowers his legs to accommodate her. When she's straddling him, he runs his hands up and down her back. She's wearing a purple dress and black boots. A couple of grimy mops and a giant yellow bucket are propped next to them.

"I promise this won't happen when we see One Direction," he says seriously.

"You hate One Direction."

"Yeah, but I guess I have to make this up to you. Be a good boyfriend and such." His hands tease the exposed skin on her legs. He makes a walking motion up her thigh with his fingers. I can almost feel the goose bumps for her.

She throws back her head this time and starts to sing a One Direction song. It clashes with the music playing behind them, and she's a worse singer than he is.

"Oh god," he says, covering her mouth. "I love you, but no." He pulls his hand away, and she grabs it back to kiss his palm.

"Yeah you do. I love you back."

It's when they kiss that I wake up. I feel intense disappointment. I lie very still, hoping to fall asleep again so I can see what happens to them. I need to know if they got out in time to see The Vamps play at least one song. Or if he kept his word and took her to One Direction. Their togetherness has made me feel so incredibly lonely that I bury my face in the pillow and cry. I liked their stuffy little room better than mine. I begin to hum out the tune of the song that was playing, and then I suddenly bolt upright in bed.

They *did* get out. During intermission. I can hear his laughter and see the confusion on the face of the janitor who opened the door for them. How do I know that? How can I see something that never happened? Unless...

That wasn't a dream. It happened.

To me.

Oh my god. That girl was *me*.

I reach up to touch my face, smiling a little. He loved me. He was so...full of life. I lie back down, wondering what happened to him and if he's the reason I'm here. Why hasn't he come to find me? Can a person forget that kind of love?

And how exactly did my life go from that...to this nightmare?



School has been out for over fifteen minutes. The hallway is empty, yet here I stand, still waiting for The Shrimp to show up. I'm not sure what I would even ask her if she did show up. I just got a feeling when I saw her—a feeling that she was hiding something. Maybe it's something she doesn't even realize she's hiding, but I want to find out what she knows. Why she hates Charlie so much. Why she hates *me* so much.

My phone rings. My father again. I press ignore, but then see that I've somehow missed a few texts. I open them, but none are from Charlie. Not that they could be, since I have her phone. I've simply accepted the fact that I still have a little bit of hope that this is all a joke. That she'll either call or text or show up to laugh about it.

The most recent text is from Landon.

Get your ass to practice. I'm not covering for you again, and we have a game in three hours.

I have no idea what move will be the most efficient use of my time. Surely practice won't be, considering I couldn't care less about football right now. But if practice is where I normally am at this hour, I should probably be there in case Charlie shows up. After all, everyone seems to think she'll be at the game tonight. And since I don't know where else to look or what else to do, I guess I'll look for her there. Doesn't look like The Shrimp agreed to my request, anyway.

I finally locate the locker rooms, and I'm relieved to find them empty. Everyone else is out on the field, so I use the privacy to search for the box I wrote about in the letters to myself. When I locate it at the top of the locker, I pull it down and take a seat on the bench, lifting the lid.

I flip quickly through the pictures. *Our first kiss. Our first fight. Where we met.* I finally get to a letter at the bottom of the box. Across the top is Charlie's name, written in the handwriting I've come to recognize as my own.

I look around to ensure I still have complete privacy, and then I unfold the letter.

It's dated last week. Just one day before we lost our memories for the first time.

Charlie,

Well, I guess this is it. The end of us. The end of Charlie and Silas.

At least it didn't come as a surprise. We've both known, since the day your father was sentenced, that we wouldn't be able to move past that. You blame my father, I blame yours. They blame each other. Our mothers, who used to be best friends, won't even speak each other's names out loud.

But hey, at least we tried, right? We tried hard, but when two families are torn apart like ours were, it's a little difficult to look ahead at the future we could possibly have and actually be excited about it.

Yesterday, when you approached me about Avril, I denied it. You accepted my denial, because you know I never lie to you. Somehow, you've always seemed to know what's going on in my head before I even do, so you never question whether or not I'm telling the truth, because you already know.

And that's what bothers me, because you so easily accepted my lie, when I know you know it's true. And that leads me to believe that I was right. You aren't seeing Brian because you like him. You aren't seeing him behind my back to get revenge on me. The only reason you're with him is because you're trying to punish yourself. And you accepted my lie, because if you broke up with me, it would relieve you of your guilt.

You don't want to be relieved of your guilt. Your guilt is your way of punishing yourself for your recent behavior, and without it, you won't be able to treat people the way you've been treating them.

I know this about you, because me and you, Charlie? We're the same. No matter how tough you've been trying to act lately, I know that deep down you have a heart that bleeds in the presence of injustice. I know that every time you lash out at someone, it makes you cringe inside. But you do it because you think you have to. Because your father is manipulating you into believing that if you're vindictive enough, people won't touch you.

You told me once that too much good in a person's life will stunt their growth. You said pain is necessary, because in order for a person to succeed, they must first learn to conquer adversity. And that's what you do...you deliver adversity where you see fit. Maybe you do it to gain respect. To intimidate. Whatever your reasons, I can't do this anymore. I can't watch you tear people down in order to build yourself up.

I'd rather love you at the bottom than despise you at the top.

It doesn't have to be this way, Charlie. You're allowed to love me, despite what your father says. You're allowed to be happy. What you can't allow is for negativity to choke you until we no longer breathe the same air.

I want you to stop seeing Brian. But I also want you to stop seeing me. I want you to stop trying to find a way to free your father. I want you to stop allowing him to mislead you. I want you to stop resenting me every time I defend my own father.

You act one way in front of everyone else, but at night when I'm on the phone with you, I get the real Charlie. It's going to be absolute torture not dialing your number and hearing your voice before I go to sleep each night, but I can't do this anymore. I can't only love that part of you—the real part of you. I want to love you when I talk to you at night and I also want to love you when I see you during the day, but you're beginning to show two different sides of yourself.

And I only like one of those sides.

As much as I try, I can't possibly imagine how hurt you must be since your father went away. But you can't let that change who you are. Please stop caring about what other people think. Stop allowing your father's actions to define you. Figure out what you did with the Charlie I fell in love with. And when you find her, I'll be here. I told you before I'll never stop loving you. I'll never forget what we have.

But lately, it seems that you've forgotten.

I've enclosed some pictures I want you to go through. Hopefully they'll help remind you of what we could have again someday. A love that wasn't dictated by our parents or defined by our family status. A love we couldn't stop if we tried. A love that got us through some of the hardest moments of our lives.

Never forget, Charlie.

Never stop.

~Silas



“Silas, Coach wants you suited up and on the field in five.”

I sit up straight at the sound of the voice. I’m not at all surprised that I don’t recognize the guy standing in the doorway to the locker room, but I nod as if I do. I begin shoving all the pictures and the letter from the box into the backpack, stowing it away in my locker.

I was going to break up with her.

I wonder if I did break up with her? I still have the letter, though. It was written the day before we lost our memories. Our relationship was obviously on a rapid decline. Maybe I gave her the box and she read the letter and then gave it back to me?

Endless possibilities and theories plague my mind as I attempt to put on the football gear. I end up having to Google how to do it on my phone. Ten minutes have easily passed by the time I’m dressed and walking onto the field. Landon is the first to notice me. He breaks formation and jogs in my direction. He puts his hands on my shoulders and leans in.

“I’m tired of covering for you. Get whatever shit is screwing up your head out of there. You need to focus, Silas. This game is important, and Dad will be pissed if you blow it.”

He releases my shoulders and jogs back onto the field. The guys are all lined up, doing what looks like a whole lot of nothing. Some of them are passing footballs back and forth. Others are sitting in the grass, stretching. I take a seat in the grass next to where Landon has just plopped down, and I begin to mock his movements.

I like him. I can only recall two conversations we’ve had in our life, and they’ve both consisted of Landon spitting some sort of direction at me. I know I’m the older brother, but he seems to act like I treat him with respect. We had to have been close. I can tell by the way he’s looking at me that he’s suspicious of my behavior. He knows me well enough to know something is up.

I try to use this to my advantage. I stretch my leg out in front of me and lean forward. “I can’t find Charlie,” I say to him. “I’m worried about her.”

Landon laughs under his breath. “I should have known this had to do with her.” He switches legs and faces me. “And what do you mean you can’t find her? Her phone was in your car this morning. She can’t very well call you from it. She’s probably at home.”

I shake my head. “No one has heard from her since last night. She never made it home. Janette reported her missing an hour ago.”

His eyes are locked with mine, and I see them shift to concern. “What about her mom?”

I shake my head. “You know how she is. She’s no help.”

Landon nods. “True,” he says. “Damn shame what this has turned her into.”

His words make me contemplate. If she hasn’t always been this way, what made her change? Maybe the sentencing destroyed her. I feel a small shred of sympathy for the woman. More than I did this morning.

“What did the police say? I doubt they’ll consider her a missing person if all she’s done is skip school today. They have to have more evidence than that.”

The word evidence sticks with me as it falls from his mouth.

I haven’t wanted to admit this to myself, because I want to focus on finding her, but deep down I’ve been a little concerned how this looks for me. If she really is missing and she doesn’t show up soon, I have a feeling the only person the police will be interested in questioning is the last person to see her. And considering I have her wallet, her phone, and every letter and journal entry she’s ever written—that doesn’t bode well for Silas Nash.

If they question me—how will I know what to tell them? I don’t remember our last words. I don’t remember what she was wearing. I don’t even have a valid excuse as to why I have all of her belongings. Any answer I give them would be a lie on a polygraph because I don’t remember any of it.

What if something happened to her and I really am responsible? What if I’ve suffered some kind of shock, and that’s why I can’t remember anything? What if I hurt her and this is my mind’s way of convincing me I didn’t?

“Silas? Are you okay?”

My eyes flick up to Landon’s. *I have to hide the evidence.*

I push my palms into the ground and immediately stand. I turn and run in the direction of the locker rooms.

“Silas!” he yells after me. I keep running. I run until I reach the building, and I push open the door so hard it slaps the wall behind it. I run straight to my locker and swing it open.

I reach inside but feel nothing.

No.

I touch the walls, the floor of the locker; I swipe my hands around every empty inch of it.

It’s gone.

I run my hands through my hair and spin around, looking all around the locker room, hoping maybe I left the backpack on the floor. I swing open Landon’s locker and pull everything out of it. It’s not in there, either. I open the next locker and do the same. I open the next. Nothing.

The backpack is nowhere.

I’m either going crazy or someone was just in here.

“Shit. Shit, shit, shit.”

When all of the contents from the entire row of lockers are on the floor, I move to the other wall of lockers and begin doing the same to them. I look inside other people’s backpacks. I empty gym bags, watching as gym clothes tumble to the floor. I find anything and everything, from cell phones to cash to condoms.

But no letters. No journals. No photographs.

“Nash!”

I spin around to see a man filling the doorway, looking at me like he has no idea who I am or what’s gotten into me. *That makes two of us.* “What in the hell are you doing?”

I look around at the mess I’ve made. It looks like a tornado just ripped through the locker room.

How am I going to get out of this?

I’ve just destroyed every single locker in here. And what explanation would I give them? *I’m looking for stolen evidence so the police won’t arrest me for my girlfriend’s disappearance?*

“Someone...” I squeeze the back of my neck again. This must be one of my old ticks—squeezing the stress out of my neck. “Someone stole my wallet,” I mutter.

The coach looks around the locker room, the anger never once leaving his face. He points at me. “Clean this up, Nash! Now! And then get your ass to my office!” He walks away, leaving me alone.

I waste no time. I’m relieved I left all my clothes on the bench and not in my locker with the stuff that was stolen. My keys are still in my pants pocket. As soon as I’m out of my football gear and back into my clothes, I walk out the door, but I don’t go in the direction of the offices. I head straight for the parking lot.

Straight for my car.

I have to find Charlie.

Tonight.

Otherwise, I could be sitting completely helpless in a jail cell.



I hear the lock open again, and I sit up. The pills the nurse gave me make me feel drowsy. I don't know how long I was asleep, but it couldn't have been long enough to already be time for another meal. However, she comes in carrying another tray. I'm not even hungry. I wonder if I finished my spaghetti earlier. I can't even remember eating it. I must be a lot crazier than I thought. But I did have a memory. I debate telling her, but it feels private. Something I want to keep for myself.

"Dinner time!" she says, setting it down. She lifts the lid to reveal a plate of rice and sausage. I eye it warily, wondering if I'm going to have to take more pills. As if reading my mind, she hands me the teeny paper cup.

"You're still here," I say, trying to stall. These pills make me feel like crap.

She smiles. "Yes. Take your pills so that you can eat before it gets cold." I pour them into my mouth while she watches, and I take a sip of water.

"If you behave today, you may be able to go to the rec room for a while tomorrow. I know you must be itching to get out of this room."

What constitutes behaving? So far there hasn't been much mischief to get up to.

I eat my dinner with a plastic fork while she watches me. I must be a real delinquent if I have to be supervised during dinner.

"I'd rather use the restroom than the rec room," I tell her.

"Eat first. I'll be back to take you to the restroom and to have a shower."

I feel like a prisoner rather than a patient.

"Why am I here?" I ask.

"You don't remember?"

"Would I be asking if I remembered?" I snap. I wipe my mouth as her eyes narrow.

"Finish your food," she says coldly.

I grow immediately angry at my situation—at the way she's dictating every second of my life as if it's hers to live.

I fling the plate across the room. It smashes against the wall by the television. Rice and sausage fly everywhere.

That felt good. That felt *more* than good. That felt like *me*.

I laugh then. Throw my head back and laugh. It's a deep laugh, wicked. *Oh my god!* This is why I'm here. *Craaaaazy*.

I can see the muscles in her jaw clench. I've made her mad. *Good*. I stand up and run for a broken

shard of plate. I don't know what's come over me, but this feels right. Defending myself feels right.

She tries to grab me, but I slip out of her grasp. I pick up a sharp piece of porcelain. What type of mental hospital gives you porcelain plates? It's a disaster waiting to happen. I hold the shard toward her and take a step forward. "Tell me what's going on."

She doesn't move. Looks quite calm, actually.

That's when the door behind me must open, because the next thing I know there's a sharp sting in my neck and I'm falling to the ground.



I pull over on the side of the road. I grip the steering wheel, trying to calm myself down.

Everything is gone. I have no idea who took it. Someone is probably reading our letters right now. They'll read everything we wrote to ourselves, and depending on who took it, I probably look certifiably insane.

I grab a sheet of blank paper I find in the back seat, and I begin to write things down. Anything I can remember. I'm pissed, because I can't remember even a fraction of what was in the notes inside the backpack. Our addresses, our locker codes, our birthdays, all the names of our friends and family—I can't remember any of it. What little I can recall, I write down. I can't let this stop me from finding her.

I have no idea where to go next. I could visit the tarot shop again; see if she returned there. I could try and find the address to whatever property has the gate that's in the picture in her bedroom. There has to be a connection with the tarot shop displaying that same picture.

I could drive to the prison and visit Charlie's father, see what he knows.

Prison is probably the last place I should go right now, though.

I grab my phone and begin scrolling through it. I pass the pictures from just last night. A night I don't recall a single second of. There are pictures of me and Charlie, pictures of our tattoos, pictures of a church, pictures of a street musician.

The last picture is of Charlie, standing next to a cab. It appears that I'm on the other side of the street, snapping a picture of her as she prepares to climb inside it.

This had to be the last time I saw her. In the letter it said she got into a cab on Bourbon Street.

I zoom in on the picture, my excitement getting caught in my throat. There's a license plate on the front of the cab and a phone number on the side of the cab.

Why didn't I think of this already?

I jot down the phone number and license plate, and dial the number.

I feel like I'm finally making progress.

The cab company almost refused to give me information. I finally convinced the operator that I was a detective and needed to question the driver regarding a missing person. That's only half of a lie. The guy on the phone said he had to ask around and call me back. It took about thirty minutes before

my phone rang again.

It was the actual driver of the cab I spoke to this time. He said a girl matching the description of Charlie hailed his cab last night, but before he could take her anywhere, she told him never mind and she shut the door and walked away.

She just...walked away?

Why would she do that? Why would she not catch up to me? She had to know I was probably just around the next corner if that's where we parted ways.

She had to have an agenda. I don't remember a thing about her, but based on what I've read, everything she does seems to have a purpose. But what could her purpose have been on Bourbon Street at that time of night?

The only things that come to mind are the tarot shop and the diner. But in the notes, it states that Charlie never showed back up to the diner, based on information from someone named Amy. Was she going to find Brian? I feel a prickle of jealousy at the thought, but I'm almost confident she wouldn't have done that.

It has to be the tarot shop.

I search Google on my phone, unable to remember the exact name of the place written in our notes. I mark two of them in the French Quarter and set my GPS to take me there.



I can tell almost immediately upon entering that this is the shop we described in the notes. The one we visited just last night.

Last night. *God*. Why can't I remember something that just happened one day ago?

I make my way up and down each aisle, taking in everything around me, not even sure what I'm in search of. When I reach the last aisle, I recognize the photo hanging on the wall. The picture of the gate.

It's here for decoration. Not something for sale. I lift up on my toes until my fingers grab at the frame, and I pull it down to inspect it closer. The gate is tall, guarding a house in the background that I can barely make out in the picture. In the corner of one of the massive columns attached to the gate is the name of the house. *Jamais Jamais*.

"Can I help you?"

I look up to see a man towering over me, which is impressive. I'm six foot one, according to my driver's license. He has to be six foot five.

I point down to the photograph in my hands. "Do you know what this picture is of?"

The man snatches the frame out of my hands. "Seriously?" He seems agitated. "I didn't know what it was when your girlfriend asked me last night, and I still don't know what it is tonight. It's a damn picture." He hangs it back on the wall.

"Don't touch anything unless it's for sale and you plan to purchase it." He begins to walk away, so I follow him.

"Wait," I say, taking two steps to his long, single strides. "My girlfriend?"

He doesn't stop walking toward the register. "Girlfriend. Sister. Cousin. Whatever."

"Girlfriend," I clarify, even though I don't know why I'm clarifying. He obviously doesn't care. "Did she come back in here last night? After we left?"

He makes his way behind the register. "We closed right after the two of you left." He plants his gaze on mine and arches an eyebrow. "You gonna buy anything, or are you just gonna follow me around with stupid questions the rest of the night?"

I swallow. He makes me feel younger. Immature. He's the epitome of man, and the bone in his

eyebrow makes me feel like a frightened child.

Suck it up, Silas. You're not a pussy.

"I just have one more stupid question."

He begins ringing up a customer. He doesn't respond, so I continue.

"What does *Jamais Jamais* mean?"

He doesn't even look at me.

"It means *Never Never*," someone says from behind me.

I immediately turn, but my feet feel heavy, like I've sunken into my shoes. *Never Never?*

This can't be a coincidence. Charlie and I repeat this phrase over and over in our letters.

I look at the woman the voice belongs to, and she's staring at me, chin lifted, face straight. Her hair is pulled back. It's dark, sporadically streaked with gray strands. She's wearing a long, flowing piece of material that pools around her feet at the floor. I'm not even sure it's a dress. It looks as if she just fashioned something out of a sheet and a sewing machine.

She has to be the tarot reader. She's playing the part well.

"Where is that house located? The one in the photo on the wall?" I point to the photograph. She turns and stares at it for several long seconds. Without facing me again, she crooks her finger for me to follow her, and she begins to head toward the back of the store.

I reluctantly follow her. Before we pass through a doorway of beaded curtains, my phone begins to vibrate in my pants pocket. It rattles against my keys, and the woman turns and looks at me over her shoulder. "Turn it off."

I look down at the screen and see that it's my father again. I silence the phone. "I'm not here for a reading," I clarify. "I'm just looking for someone."

"The girl?" she says, taking a seat on the other side of a small table in the center of the room. She motions for me to sit, but I refuse the offer.

"Yes. We were here last night."

She nods and begins to shuffle a deck of cards. "I remember," she says. A small smirk plays at the corner of her mouth. I watch as she separates the cards into stacks. She lifts her head and her face is expressionless. "But that only makes one of us, doesn't it."

The statement sends chills over my arms. I take two quick steps forward and grab the back of the empty chair. "How do you know that?" I blurt out.

She motions to the chair again. This time I sit. I wait for her to speak again, to tell me what she knows. She's the first one to be clued in to what's happening to me.

My hands begin to shake. My pulse is throbbing behind my eyes. I squeeze them shut and pull my hands through my hair to hide my nerves. "Please," I tell her. "If you know something, please tell me."

She begins to shake her head slowly. Back and forth, back and forth. "It's not that easy, Silas," she says.

She knows my name. I want to scream *Victory*, but I still don't have any answers.

"Last night, your card was blank. I've never seen that before." She runs her hand across a stack of cards, smoothing them out in a line. "I've heard of it. We've *all* heard of it happening. But I don't know anyone who has actually *seen* it."

Blank card? I feel like I remember reading that in our notes, but it doesn't help when I no longer have the notes in my possession. And who is she referring to when she says *we've* all heard of it.

"What does it mean? What can you tell me? How do I find Charlie?" My questions tumble out of my mouth and trip over each other.

"That picture," she says. "Why are you so curious about that house?"

I open my mouth to tell her about the picture in Charlie's room, but I clamp it shut. I don't know if

I can trust her. I don't know her. She's the first one to know what's going on with me. That could be an answer, or it could be an indication of guilt. If Charlie and I are under some sort of spell, she's probably one of the few who would know how to do something of that magnitude.

God, this is ridiculous. A spell? Why am I even allowing myself these thoughts?

"I was just curious about the name," I say, lying to her about my inquiry of the house in the picture. "What else can you tell me?"

She continues realigning stacks of cards, never flipping them over. "What I can tell you...the *only* thing I will tell you...is that you need to remember what it is that someone so desperately wanted you to forget." Her eyes meet mine, and she lifts her chin again. "You may go now. I am of no further help to you."

She scoots away from the table and stands. Her frock bellows out with the swift movement, and the shoes she has on underneath make me question her authenticity. I would assume a gypsy would be barefoot. Or is she a witch? A wizard? Whatever she is, I want desperately to believe that she can help me more than she has. I can tell based on my hesitation that I'm not the type of person to buy into this shit. But my desperation is heavier than my skepticism. If it takes believing in dragons to find Charlie, then I'll be the first to wield a sword in the face of its fire.

"There has to be *something*," I tell her. "I can't find Charlie. I can't remember anything. I don't even know where to start looking. You have to give me more information than this." I stand, my voice desperate and my eyes even more so.

She simply tilts her head and smiles.

"Silas, the answers to your questions lie with someone who is very close to you." She points to the doorway. "You may go now. You have a lot of searching to do."

Very close to me?

My father? Landon? Who else am I close with besides Charlie? I glance at the beaded curtains and then back at her. She's already walking away, toward a door in the back of the building. I watch her as she leaves.

I run my hands up my face. I want to scream.



When I wake up, everything is clean. No rice, no sausage, no shards of porcelain to cut a bitch.

Whoa! Where did that come from? I feel loopy. She's got this timed down to a T.

Knock Sammy out, bring her crappy food, knock Sammy out, bring her crappy food.

But this time when she returns, she doesn't have crappy food. She's carrying a towel and a small bar of soap.

Finally! A restroom.

"Shower time," she says. She's not as friendly this time. Her mouth is a tight line across her face. I stand up, expecting to sway a little. The needle to the neck was stronger than the other stuff they've been giving me, but I don't feel as foggy. My mind is sharp; my body is ready to react.

"Why are you the only one who comes?" I say. "If you're a nurse, you must work in shifts."

She turns away, walks to the door.

"Hello...?"

"Behave," she says. "Next time things won't go as well for you."

I shut my mouth because she's taking me out of this box, and I really, really want to see what's behind that door.

She opens the door and lets me walk out first. There's another door in front of me. I'm confused. She turns right and I see there's a hallway. Just to my right is a bathroom. I haven't used the toilet in hours, and the minute I see it my bladder starts to ache. She hands me the towel. "Shower only has cold water. Don't take long."

I close the door. It's like a bunker. No windows, raw concrete. The toilet doesn't have a lid or a seat, just a rimless hole with a sink next to it. I use it anyway.

On top of the sink is a new hospital gown and underwear. I study everything as I pee, looking for something. Anything. There's a rusted pipe near the floor, jutting out of the wall. I flush the toilet and move toward it. Sticking my hand inside, I feel around. *Gross*. A piece of the pipe has corroded away.

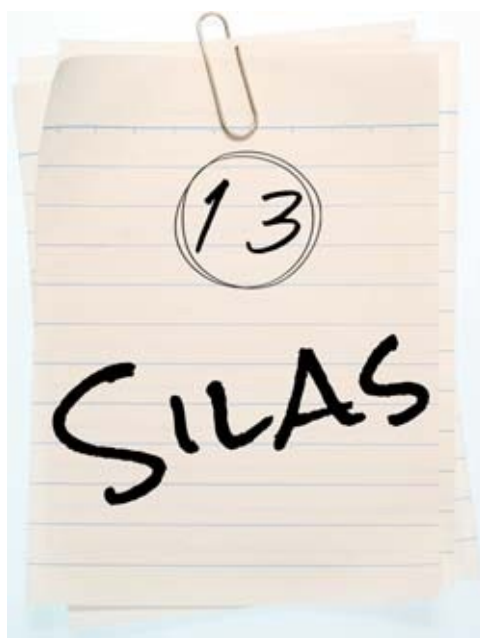
I go to turn the water on in the shower in case she's listening. It's a tiny little bit of metal, but with some effort I'm able to detach it from the wall. It's something, at least.

I carry it in the shower with me, holding it in one hand while I wash. The water is so cold; I can't stop my teeth from chattering. I try to clench my jaw tighter, but my teeth still rattle inside my head despite how much I try to still them.

How pathetic am I? I have no control over my own teeth. No control over my own memories. No control over when I eat, sleep, shower or pee.

The only thing I feel I can control is my eventual escape from wherever it is that I am. I clutch the pipe in my hands with all my strength, knowing it could be the only thing that gets me back some form of control.

When I walk out of the bathroom, it's wrapped in toilet paper and stuffed in my underwear, a simple pair of white panties she left for me. I don't have a plan yet; I'll just wait for the right moment.



It's dark now. I've been driving for over two hours without a clue as to where to go next. I can't go back home. I can't go to Charlie's house. I don't know anyone else, so the only thing I can do is drive.

I have eight missed calls. Two are from Landon. One from Janette.

The rest are from my father.

I also have eight voicemails, none of which I've listened to yet. I don't want to worry about any of them right now. None of them have any clue what's really going on, and no one would believe me if I told them. I don't blame them. I keep repeating the entire day in my head, and it seems too ridiculous for me to even believe—and I'm the one *living* it.

It's all too ridiculous, but way too real.

I pull over at a gas station to fill up my car. I'm not even sure if I've eaten anything today, but I feel light-headed, so I grab a bag of chips and a bottle of water while inside the store.

The entire time I fill my tank with gas, I wonder about Charlie.

When I'm back on the road, I'm still wondering about Charlie.

I wonder if Charlie's eaten anything.

I wonder if she's alone.

I wonder if she's being taken care of.

I wonder how I'm possibly supposed to find her when she could be anywhere in the entire world right now. All I'm doing is driving in circles, slowing every time I pass a girl walking on a sidewalk. I don't know where to look. I don't know where to go. I don't know how to be the guy who saves her.

I wonder what people do when they have no place to go and no place to be.

I wonder if this is what it's like to be crazy. Certifiably insane. I feel as though I have absolutely zero control over my own mind.

And if I'm not the one in control...who is?

My phone rings again. I look at the caller ID and see that it's Landon. I don't know why I pick it up to answer it. Maybe I'm just tired of being inside my own head and not getting any answers. I pull over to the side of the road to talk to him.

"Hello?"

"Please tell me what the hell is going on."

"Can anyone hear you?"

"No," he says. "The game just ended. Dad is talking to the police. Everyone's worried about you, Silas."

I don't respond. I feel bad that they're worried, but even worse that no one seems to be worried about Charlie.

"Have they found Charlie yet?"

I can hear people shouting in the background. It sounds like he called me the second the game ended. "They're looking," he says.

But there's something else in his voice. Something unspoken.

"What is it, Landon?"

He sighs again. "Silas...they're looking for you too. They think..." His voice is heavy with worry. "They think you know where she is."

I close my eyes. I knew this would happen. I wipe my palms down my jeans. "I don't know where she is."

Several seconds pass before Landon speaks again. "Janette went to the police. She said she thought you were acting strange, so when she found Charlie's things in a backpack inside your gym locker, she turned them in to the police. You had her wallet, Silas. And her phone."

"Finding Charlie's things in my possession is hardly proof that I'm responsible for her disappearance. It's proof that I'm her boyfriend."

"Come home," he says. "Tell them you have nothing to hide. Answer their questions. If you cooperate, they'll have no reason to accuse you."

Ha. If only answering their questions was that easy.

"Do you think I have something to do with her disappearance?"

"Do you?" he asks immediately.

"No."

"Then no," he says. "I don't think you have anything to do with it. Where are you?"

"I don't know."

I hear a muffled noise, like he's covering the phone with his hand. I can hear voices in the background.

"Did you get hold of him?" a man asks.

"Still trying, Dad," Landon says.

More muttering.

"You there, Silas?" he asks.

"Yeah. I have a question," I say. "Have you ever heard of a place called *Jamais Jamais*?"

Silence. I wait for him to respond, but he doesn't.

"Landon? Have you heard of it?"

Another heavy sigh. "It's Charlie's old house, Silas. What the hell is wrong with you? You're on drugs, aren't you? Jesus Christ, Silas. What the hell did you take? Is that what happened to Charlie? Is that why..."

I hang up the phone while he's still in the middle of spouting off questions. I search Brett Wynwood's home address on the Internet. It takes me a while, but two addresses pop up in the results. One I remember, because I was just there earlier today. It's where Charlie lives now.

The other is one I don't recognize.

It's the address to *Jamais Jamais*.



THE HOUSE SITS ON SIX ACRES, OVERLOOKING LAKE BORGNE. IT WAS BUILT IN 1860, EXACTLY ONE YEAR BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR BEGAN. THE HOUSE WAS ORIGINALLY NAMED "LA TERRE RENCONTRE L'EAU," WHICH MEANS "LAND MEETS WATER."

IT WAS USED AS A HOSPITAL DURING THE WAR, HOUSING WOUNDED CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS. YEARS AFTER THE WAR, THE HOUSE WAS PURCHASED BY A BANKER, FRANK WYNWOOD, IN 1880. THE HOME REMAINED IN THE FAMILY, PASSED DOWN THREE GENERATIONS, ULTIMATELY LANDING IN THE HANDS OF THEN THIRTY-YEAR-OLD BRETT WYNWOOD IN 1998.

BRETT WYNWOOD AND HIS FAMILY OCCUPIED THE HOME UNTIL 2005, WHEN HURRICANE KATRINA CAUSED EXTENSIVE DAMAGE TO THE PROPERTY. THE FAMILY WAS FORCED TO ABANDON THE HOME, AND IT SAT UNTOUCHED FOR SEVERAL YEARS BEFORE RENOVATIONS BEGAN. THE ENTIRE HOUSE WAS GUTTED AND REBUILT, WITH ONLY PORTIONS OF THE ORIGINAL OUTER WALLS AND ROOF SALVAGED.

IN 2011, THE WYNWOOD FAMILY MOVED BACK INTO THEIR HOME. DURING THE UNVEILING, BRETT WYNWOOD ANNOUNCED THE HOME HAD BEEN GIVEN A NEW NAME: “JAMAIS JAMAIS.”

WHEN ASKED WHY HE CHOSE THE FRENCH TRANSLATION OF NEVER NEVER, HE SAYS HIS DAUGHTER, FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD CHARLIZE WYNWOOD, ACTUALLY DECIDED ON THE NAME. “SHE SAYS IT’S AN HOMAGE TO FAMILY HISTORY. NEVER FORGET THOSE WHO PAVED THE WAY BEFORE YOU. NEVER STOP TRYING TO BETTER THE WORLD FOR THOSE WHO WILL INHABIT IT AFTER YOU.”

THE WYNWOOD FAMILY OCCUPIED THE HOME UNTIL 2013, WHEN IT WENT INTO FORECLOSURE FOLLOWING AN INVESTIGATION INTO WYNWOOD-NASH FINANCIAL GROUP. THE HOME WAS SOLD IN AUCTION IN LATE 2013 TO AN ANONYMOUS BIDDER.

I add the page to my favorites in my phone and make a note of the article. I found it after I pulled up to the property—right up to the locked gate.

The height of the gate is impressive, as if it’s letting visitors know that the people beyond this gate are mightier than the people who are not.

I wonder if that’s how Charlie’s father felt living here. I wonder how mighty he felt when someone else took ownership of the property that’s been in his family for generations.

The property is located at the end of an isolated road, as if the road belongs to the gate, too. After attempting to find a way around or through the gate, I conclude that there isn’t one. It’s dark now, so I could be missing a path or an alternate entrance. I’m not even sure why I want past the gate, but I can’t help but feel like the pictures of this property are clues.

Considering I’m wanted for questioning, it’s probably best if I don’t drive around any more than I have to tonight, so I decide to stay here until morning. I turn off my car. If I’m going to be worth anything tomorrow, I need to try and get at least a few hours of sleep.

I lean my seat back, close my eyes and wonder if I’m going to dream tonight. I don’t even know what I would dream about. I can’t dream if I don’t sleep, and I have a feeling falling asleep tonight is going to be impossible.

My eyes flick back open with that thought.

The video.

In one of my letters, I mentioned falling asleep to a video of Charlie sleeping. I search my phone until I find it. I press play and wait to hear Charlie’s voice for the first time.



More sleeping.

Not because of pills this time. I pretended to swallow them and kept them in my cheek. She stayed so long they were starting to dissolve. As soon as the door closed behind her, I spit them into my hand.

No more drowsiness. I need to be clear of mind.

I slept of my own accord and had more dreams earlier. Dreams of the same guy as in the first dream. Or should I say the first memory? In my dream, the guy was leading me through a dirty street. He wasn't looking at me, he was looking ahead, his whole body pulling forward like some invisible force had hold of him. In his left hand was a camera. He stopped suddenly and looked across the street. I followed his gaze.

"There," he said. "Look."

But I didn't want to look. I turned my back on what he was seeing, looked at a wall instead. Then all of a sudden, his hand was no longer in mine. I turned and watched him cross the street and approach a woman sitting cross-legged against a wall. In her arms she cradled a tiny baby wrapped in a woolen blanket. The guy crouched down in front of her. They spoke for a long time. He handed her something and she smiled. When he stood up, the baby started to cry. That's when he snapped the picture.

I could still see her face when I woke up, but it wasn't a real-life image, it was a photo. The one he took. A ragged mother with knotted hair, staring down at her infant, his tiny mouth open in a scream, their backdrop the chipped paint of a bright blue door.

When the dream was over, I wasn't sad like last time. I wanted to meet the boy who documented suffering in such vivid color.



I lie awake most of what I assume is the night. She returns with breakfast.

"You again," I say. "Never a day off...or an hour."

"Yup," she says. "We're understaffed, so I'm working doubles. Eat."

"Not hungry."

She offers me the cup of pills. I don't take them.

"I want to see a doctor," I say.

“The doctor is very busy today. I can make an appointment for you. He can probably see you sometime next week.”

“No. I want to see a doctor today. I want to know what medication you’re giving me and I want to know why I’m here.”

It’s the first time I’ve seen anything but bored friendliness on her face. She leans forward, and I can smell the coffee on her breath. “Don’t be a brat,” she hisses. “You don’t get to make demands here, do you understand me?” She shoves the pills at me.

“I’m not taking those until a doctor tells me why I am,” I say, nodding toward the cup. “Do *you* understand *me*?”

I think she’s going to hit me. My hand feels for the piece of pipe under my pillow. The muscles in my shoulders and back tense, the balls of my feet press down on the tile. I am ready to spring if I need to. But the nurse turns, inserts her key into the door, and is gone. I hear the click of the lock, and then I’m alone again.



“I can’t believe you got away with that,” I say to her. I drop my hands to her waist, pushing her until her back is against her bedroom door. She places her palms against my chest and looks up at me with an innocent grin.

“Got away with what?”

I laugh and press my lips against her neck. “It’s an *homage* to family *history*?” I laugh, moving my lips up her neck, drawing closer to her mouth. “What are you going to do if you ever want to break up with me? You’ll be stuck living in a house that was named after the phrase you use with your ex-boyfriend.”

She shakes her head and pushes against me so she can walk past me. “If I ever want to break up with you, I’ll just have Daddy change the name of our house.”

“He would never do that, Char. He thought the b.s. meaning you gave him was genius.”

She shrugs. “Then I’ll burn it to the ground.” She sits on the edge of her mattress, and I take a seat next to her, pushing her onto her back. She giggles as I lean over her and cage her in with my hands. She’s so beautiful.

I’ve always known she was beautiful, but this year has been really good to her. *Really* good. I look down at her chest. I can’t help it. They’ve just gotten so...*perfect* this year.

“Do you think your boobs are finished growing?” I ask her.

She laughs and slaps me on the shoulder. “You’re disgusting.”

I bring my fingers up to where her t-shirt scoops down at her neck. I trail my fingers across her chest until I meet the dip in her shirt. “When do you think you’ll let me see them?”

“Jamais, Jamais,” she says with a laugh.

I groan. “Come on, Charlie baby. I’ve loved you for fourteen years now. That should earn me something—a quick peek, a hand up the shirt.”

“We’re fourteen, Silas. Ask me again when we’re fifteen.”

I smile. “That’s only two months away for me.” I press my lips to hers and can feel her chest rise against mine with her quick intake of breath. *God, the torture.*

Her tongue slips inside my mouth as her hand cradles the back of my head, pulling me closer. *The sweet, sweet torture.*

I lower my hand to her waist, inching her shirt up little by little until my fingers have access to her skin. I splay my hand out across her waist, feeling the heat from her body against my palm.

I continue to kiss her as my hand explores more of her, inch by inch, until one of my fingertips

meets the fabric of her bra.

I want to keep going—to feel the softness beneath my fingertips. I want to—

“Silas!”

Charlie sinks into the mattress. Her entire body is absorbed by the sheets, and I’m left palming her empty pillow.

What the hell? Where did she go? People don’t just disappear into thin air.

“Silas, open the door!”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “Charlie? Where are you?”

“Wake up!”

I open my eyes and I’m no longer in Charlie’s bed.

I’m no longer a fourteen-year-old boy about to touch a boob for the first time.

I’m...Silas. Lost and confused and sleeping in a damn car.

A fist pounds against my driver-side window. I allow my eyes a few more seconds to adjust to the sunlight pouring into my car before I look up.

Landon is standing at my door. I immediately sit up and turn around, looking behind me, to the sides of me.

It’s only Landon. No one else is with him.

I reach for the handle on the door and wait for him to step aside before I swing it open. “Did you find her?” I ask, stepping out of my car.

He shakes his head. “No, they’re still looking.” He squeezes the back of his neck, just like I do when I’m nervous or stressed.

I open my mouth to ask him how he knew where to find me. But then I close my mouth after remembering I asked him about this house right before I hung up on him. Of course he would look here.

“You need to help them find her, Silas. You have to tell them everything you know.”

I laugh. *Everything I know*. I lean against my car and fold my arms across my chest. I stop smiling at the ridiculousness of the situation, and I lock eyes with my little brother. “I don’t know anything, Landon. I don’t even know *you*. And as far as my memory is concerned, I’ve never even *met* Charlize Wynwood. How am I supposed to tell the police that?”

Landon’s head is tilted. He’s staring at me...silent and curious. He thinks I’ve gone crazy; I can see it in his eyes.

He might be right.

“Get in the car,” I tell him. “I have a lot to tell you. Let’s go for a drive.”

I open my door and climb back inside. He waits several seconds, but then he walks to the car parked in the ditch. He locks it and then makes his way to my passenger door.



“Let me get this straight,” he says, leaning forward in the booth. “You and Charlie have both been losing your memories for over a week now. You’ve both been writing yourselves letters. Those letters were in the backpack Janette found and turned in to the police. The only person who knows about this is some random tarot reader. It happens at the same time of day, every forty-eight hours, and you claim to have no recollection of what happened the day before she went missing?”

I nod.

Landon laughs and falls back against his seat. He shakes his head and picks up his drink, sticking the straw in his mouth. He takes a long sip and then sighs heavily as he returns his glass to the table.

“If this is your way of trying to get away with her murder, you’re going to need a much stronger

alibi than a damn voodoo curse.”

“She’s not dead.”

He raises a questioning eyebrow. I can’t blame him. If the tables were turned, there’s no way in hell I would believe everything that just came out of my mouth.

“Landon, I don’t expect you to believe me. I really don’t. It’s ridiculous. But for the sake of shits and giggles, will you just humor me for a few hours? Just pretend you believe me and answer questions for me, even if you think I already know the answers. Then tomorrow you can turn me in to the police if you still think I’m crazy.”

He shakes his head and looks disappointed. “Even if I thought you were crazy, I would never turn you in to the police, Silas. You’re my brother.” He motions for the waiter to come over and refill his drink. He takes a sip and then gets comfortable. “Okay. Fire away.”

I smile. I knew I liked him for a reason.

“What happened between Brett and our father?”

Landon laughs under his breath. “This is ridiculous,” he mutters. “You know more about that than I do.” But then he leans forward and begins to answer my question. “An investigation was launched a couple of years ago due to an external audit. A lot of people lost a lot of money. Dad was cleared and Brett was charged with fraud.”

“Is Dad really innocent?”

Landon shrugs. “I’d like to think he is. His name was dragged through the mud and he lost the majority of his business after what happened. He’s been trying to rebuild it, but no one trusts him with their money now. But I guess we can’t complain. We still fared better than Charlie’s family did.”

“Dad accused Charlie of taking some files from his office. What was he talking about?”

“They couldn’t figure out where the money went, so they assumed Brett or Dad was hiding it in offshore accounts. There was a stretch before the trial where Dad didn’t sleep for three days. He went through every detail of every transaction and every receipt recorded for the past ten years. One night he came out of his office holding a file. He said he found it—found where Brett was keeping the money. He finally had the information he needed to hold Brett responsible for the entire thing. He called his lawyer and told him he would deliver the evidence as soon as he got a couple hours of sleep. The next day...he couldn’t find the files. He blew up on you, assuming you had warned Charlie about it. He believes to this day that Charlie took those files. She denied it. You denied it. And without the evidence he claimed to have, they could never charge Brett on all counts. He’ll probably be out of jail in five years with good behavior, but from what Dad says, those files would have put him away for life.”

Jesus. This is a lot to remember.

I hold up a finger. “I’ll be right back.” I slip out of the booth and run out of the restaurant, straight to my car. I search for more paper to take notes on. Landon is still at the booth when I return. I don’t ask another question until I write everything down he just told me. And then I feed him a tidbit of information just to see how he responds.

“I’m the one who took those files,” I say to Landon. I look up at him and his eyes are narrowed.

“I thought you said you can’t remember anything.”

I shake my head. “I can’t. But I made a note about some files I found that I was hiding. Why do you think I would take them if they would have proved Dad’s innocence?”

Landon ponders my question for a moment then shakes his head. “I don’t know. Whoever took them never did anything with them. So the only reason you would have hid them is to protect Charlie’s father.”

“Why would I want to protect Brett Wynwood?”

“Maybe you weren’t protecting him for his own sake. Maybe you were doing it for Charlie.”

I drop the pen. *That's it.* The only reason I would have taken those files is if I were doing it to protect Charlie.

“Was she close to her father?”

Landon laughs. “Very. She was a daddy’s girl through and through. In all honesty, I think the only person she loved more than you was her father.”

This feels like I’m unraveling a piece of a puzzle, even if it’s not the puzzle I should be unraveling. Knowing the old Silas, he would have done anything to make Charlie happy. Which includes protecting her from knowing the truth about her father.

“What happened with me and Charlie after that? I mean...if she loved her father that much, you would think my father putting him behind bars would have made her never want to speak to me again.”

Landon shakes his head. “You were all she had,” he says. “You stuck by her side through it all, and nothing pissed Dad off more than knowing you didn’t stand by his side 100%.”

“Did I think Dad was innocent?”

“Yeah,” Landon says. “You just made it a point not to take sides when it came to him and Charlie. Unfortunately, to Dad that meant you were taking *their* side. The two of you haven’t been on the best terms for the past year or two. The only time he speaks to you is when he’s yelling at you from the stands at Friday night games.”

“Why is he so obsessed with me playing football?”

Landon laughs again. “He’s been obsessed with his sons attending his Alma matter since before he knew he was having sons. He’s shoved football down our throats since we could walk. I don’t mind it, but you always hated it. And that makes him resent you even more, because you have a talent for it. It’s in your blood. But you’ve never wanted anything more than to just be able to walk away from it.” He smiles. “God, you should have seen him when he showed up last night and you weren’t out on that field. He actually tried to have the game stopped until we could find you, but the officials wouldn’t allow it.”

I make a note of this. “You know...I can’t remember how to play football.”

A smirk plays on Landon’s lips. “Now that’s the first thing you’ve said today that I actually believe. The other day when we were in a huddle, you seemed lost. ‘*You. Do that thing.*’” He laughs out loud. “So add that to your list. You forgot how to play football. How convenient.”

I add it to the list.

Remember song lyrics.

Forgot people we know.

Remember people we don’t know.

Remember how to use a camera.

Hate football, but I’m forced to play.

Forgot how to play football.

I stare at the list. I’m sure I had a lot more stuff written down on my old list, but I can hardly remember any of it.

“Let me see that,” Landon says. He scrolls over the notes I’ve already taken. “Shit. You’re really taking this seriously.” He stares at it for a few seconds and then hands it back to me. “It seems like you

can remember things you wanted to learn yourself, like song lyrics and your camera. But anything else you were taught, you forgot.”

I pull the list in front of me and look at it. He might have a point, other than the fact that I can’t remember people. I make a note of that and then continue with my questions.

“How long has Charlie been seeing Brian? Were we broken up?”

He runs his hand through his hair and takes a sip of his soda. He pulls his feet up and leans against the wall, stretching his legs out on the seat. “We’re gonna be here all day, aren’t we.”

“If that’s what it takes.”

“Brian’s always had a thing for Charlie and everyone knows it. You and Brian have never gotten along because of it, but you make it work for the sake of the football team. Charlie started to change after her father went to prison. She wasn’t as nice...not that she’s ever been the nicest. But lately, she’s actually turned into somewhat of a bully. The two of you do nothing but fight now. I honestly think she hasn’t been seeing him for that long. It started with her just giving him attention when you were around, so she could piss you off. I guess for her to continue that, she had to keep up appearances with him when they were alone. I don’t buy it that she likes him, though. She’s a hell of a lot smarter than he is, and if anyone was being used, it was Brian.”

I’m writing everything down, but I’m also nodding my head. I had a feeling she wasn’t really into the guy. It seems like my relationship with Charlie was stretched as thin as air, and she was just doing what she could to test our strength.

“What are Charlie’s religious beliefs? Was she known to be into voodoo or spells or anything like that?”

“Not that I know of,” he says. “We were all raised Catholic. We don’t really practice unless it’s a significant holiday.”

I make note of that and try to think of another question. I still have so many, and I don’t know what to go with next. “Is there anything else? Anything out of the ordinary that happened last week?”

I can immediately tell he’s hiding something by the change in his facial expression and the way he shifts in his seat.

“What is it?”

He pulls his feet off the seat and leans forward, lowering his voice. “The police...they were at the house today. I heard them questioning Ezra about finding anything unusual. At first she denied it, but I think her guilt got the best of her. She mentioned finding sheets in your room. She said there was blood on them.”

I lean back against my booth and stare up at the ceiling. This isn’t good.

“Wait,” I say, leaning forward again. “That was last week. Before Charlie went missing. It can’t be tied to her if that’s what they’re thinking.”

“No, I know that. Ezra told them that too. That it was last week and she saw Charlie that day. But still, Silas. What the hell were you doing? Why was there blood on your sheets? The way police think, they’re probably assuming you beat Charlie or something, and that it finally went too far.”

“I’d never hurt her,” I say defensively. “I love that girl.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I shake my head, not understanding why I even said them. I’ve never even met her. I’ve never even spoken to her.

But I’ll be damned. I just said I love her, and I meant it straight to my core.

“How can you love her? You claim you can’t remember her.”

“I may not remember her, but I sure as hell still feel her.” I stand up. “And that’s why we need to find her. Starting with her father.”

Landon tries to calm me down, but he has no idea how frustrating it is to lose eight entire hours when you only have forty-eight hours total.

It's after eight o'clock at night already, and we've officially wasted the entire day. As soon as we left the restaurant, we headed toward the prison to pay Brett Wynwood a visit. A prison that's almost three hours away. Couple that with a two-hour wait, only to be told we aren't on the visitor list and there's nothing we can do today to change it...I'm more than pissed.

I can't afford to make mistakes when I have just hours left to figure out where she is before I lose everything I've learned since yesterday.

We pull up next to Landon's car. I kill my ignition and step out of the car, walking to the gate. There are two padlocks on it, and it looks like they're never used.

"Who bought this house?" I ask Landon.

I hear him laugh behind me, so I turn around. He sees that I lack humor in this situation, so he rolls his head.

"Come on, Silas. Drop the act, already. You know who bought the house."

I breathe steadily in through my nose and out my mouth, reminding myself that I can't blame him for thinking I'm making all of this up. I nod and then turn to face the gate again. "Humor me, Landon."

I can hear him kick at the gravel and groan. And then he says, "Janice Delacroix."

The name means nothing to me, but I walk back to my truck and open the door to make a note of the name. "Delacroix. Is that a French name?"

"Yeah," he says. "She owns one of those tourist shops downtown. Reads tarots or some shit like that. No one knows how she was able to afford the place. Her daughter goes to our school."

I stop writing. *The tarot reader*. That explains the picture, and also why she wouldn't give me more information on the house—because it seemed weird to her that I was asking about her home.

"So people actually *live* here?" I say, turning around to face him.

He shrugs. "Yeah. It's just the two of them though—her and her daughter. They probably use a different entrance. Doesn't look like this gate gets opened much."

I stare past the gate...at the house. "What's her daughter's name?"

"Cora," he says. "Cora Delacroix. But everyone calls her The Shrimp."



No one comes for a long time. I think I'm being punished. I'm thirsty and I need to go to the bathroom. After holding it as long as I can, I finally pee in the plastic cup on my breakfast tray and set the full cup in the corner of the room. I pace back and forth, pulling at my hair until I think I'm going to go crazy.

What if no one comes back? What if they've left me here to die?

The door won't budge; I bruise my fists pounding on it. I scream for someone to help me until my voice grows hoarse.

I'm sitting on the floor with my head in my hands when the door finally opens. I jump up. It's not the nurse—it's someone else this time, younger. Her scrubs hang off her small body. She looks like a little kid playing dress-up. I eye her warily as she moves across my small room. She notices the cup in the corner and raises her eyebrows.

"Do you need to use the facilities?" she asks.

"Yes."

She sets the tray down and my stomach grumbles.

"I asked to see the doctor," I say.

Her eyes dart left to right. *She's nervous. Why?*

"The doctor is busy today," she says, not looking at me.

"Where is the other nurse?"

"It's her day off," she says. I can smell the food. I am so hungry.

"I need to use the bathroom," I say. "Can you take me?"

She nods her head, but she looks afraid of me. I follow her out of the little room and into the small hallway. What kind of hospital has the toilets in a separate area from their patients' rooms? She stands off to the side while I use the restroom, wringing her hands and turning an awful shade of pink.

When I'm finished, she makes the mistake of turning toward the door. When she opens it, I pull the piece of pipe from my hospital gown and hold it toward her neck.

She faces me again and her beady eyes grow wide with fear.

"Drop the keys and back up slowly," I say. "Or I'll stick this straight in your throat."

She nods. The keys clank against the ground, and I advance toward her, my weapon extended toward her neck. I push her backward, into the room, and shove her down on the bed. She falls back and cries out.

Then I'm out the door, taking the keys with me. I pull the door shut as she flies toward it, her

mouth open in a scream. We struggle for a moment, her trying to yank it open while I get the key into the lock and hear the metal click.

My hands are shaking as I sort through the keys, trying to find the right one to open the next door. I don't really know what to expect when I step through. A hospital hallway, nurses and doctors? Will someone be there to drag me back to that tiny room?

No.

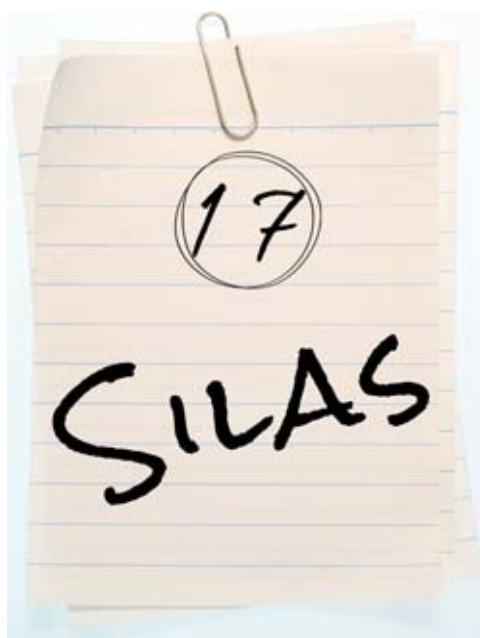
There's no way I'm going back. I'll hurt anyone who tries to stop me from getting out of here.

I don't see a hospital or staff or anyone else when I open the door. What I see instead is a very impressive wine cellar. Dusty bottles sit in hundreds of little holes. It smells of ferment and dirt. A staircase runs up one side of the cellar. There is a door at the top.

I run for the stairs, stubbing my toe hard on the concrete and feeling the wet blood run over my foot. I almost slip on it, but I catch onto the railing in time.

The top of the stairs opens to a kitchen, a single light illuminating the counters and floors. I don't pause to look around. I need to find...a door! I grab the handle, and this time it's not locked. I cry out in triumph as it flies open. The night air hits me in the face. I breathe it in gratefully.

Then I run.



“You can’t trespass, Silas!” Landon yells.

I’m trying to scale the gate, but my foot keeps slipping. “Help me over,” I yell down to him.

He walks up to me and offers his hands, palms up, despite the fact that he’s still verbally trying to stop me from climbing over. I step into his hands and he hoists me higher, allowing me to grab the bars toward the top of the gate.

“I’ll be back in ten minutes. I just want to check out the property.” I know he doesn’t believe a word I’ve said today, so I leave out the fact that I think this Cora girl knows something. If she’s inside that house, I’m going to force her to talk to me.

I finally make it to the top and down the other side. When my feet hit the dirt, I stand up. “Don’t leave until I get back.”

I turn and take a look at the house. It’s about two hundred yards away, hidden behind rows of Weeping Willow trees. They look like long arms, swaying toward the front door, coercing me to move forward.

I slowly make my way down the path that leads to the porch. It’s a beautiful house. I can see why Charlie missed it so much. I look up at the windows. Two of them are lit up on the top floor, but the bottom floor is completely dark.

I’m almost to the porch that extends across the entire front of the house. My heart is racing in my chest so fast that I can actually hear it. Other than the occasional insect noise and the pounding of my pulse, it’s completely quiet out here.

Until it’s not.

The bark is so loud and so close, it rumbles in my stomach and vibrates through my chest. I can’t see where it’s coming from.

I freeze in my tracks, careful not to make any sudden movements.

A deep growl rolls through the air like thunder. I slowly look over my shoulder without turning my body.

The dog is standing behind me, lips pulled back in a snarl, teeth so white and sharp they look like they’re glowing.

He rears back on his hind legs, and before I can run or look around for something to fight him off, he’s in the air, lunging toward me.

Straight for my throat.

I can feel his teeth pierce the skin on the back of my hand, and I know if I hadn’t covered my

throat, those teeth would be in my jugular right now. The massive strength of this animal knocks me to the ground. I can feel the flesh give way on my hand as he thrashes his head from side to side and I try to fight him off.

But then something slams into it or on top of it—a whimper and then a thud.

And then silence.

It's too dark to see what just happened. I take a deep breath and try to stand.

I look down at the dog, and a sharp piece of metal is protruding from his neck. Blood is pooling around his head, tinting the grass the color of midnight.

And then a strong scent of flowers...*lilies*...surrounds me in a rush of wind.

“It's you.”

I recognize her voice immediately, even though it comes out in a whisper. She's standing to the right of me, her face illuminated by the moonlight. Tears are streaking their way down her cheeks, and her hand is cupped over her mouth. She's wide-eyed, staring at me in shock.

She's here.

She's alive.

I want to take her in my arms and hug her and tell her it's okay, that we're going to figure this out. But she more than likely has no idea who I am.

“Charlie?”

She slowly lowers her hand away from her mouth. “My name is Charlie?” she asks.

I nod. The terrified expression on her face slowly transforms into relief. She steps forward and throws her arms around my neck, pressing her face against my chest. Sobs begin to rack her body now.

“We need to leave,” she says through her tears. “We have to get out of here before they find me.”

Find her?

I wrap my arms around her long enough to hug her, and then I take her hand and we run toward the gate. When Landon sees Charlie, he rushes to the gate and begins to shake the locks. He tries to find a way to get us out so she doesn't have to climb over, but he can't.

“Use my car,” I tell him. “Bend the gate. We have to hurry.”

He looks back at my car and then again at me. “You want me to break open the gate? Silas, that car is your baby.”

“I don't give a shit about the car!” I yell. “We need out!”

He acts fast, running straight to the car. As he climbs inside, he yells, “Get out of the way!” He puts the car in reverse and backs up, then slams on the gas.

The sound of iron on metal isn't nearly as loud as the sound my heart makes seeing the car being torn to shreds. At least I wasn't that attached to it. I've only known it less than two days.

He has to back up and drive forward two more times to bend the iron enough for Charlie and me to slip through. Once we're on the other side of the gate, I open the back door to Landon's car and help her inside.

“Just leave my car here,” I tell him. “We can worry about it later.”

When we're all in the car and finally heading away from the house, Landon picks up his cell phone. “I'll call Dad and tell him you found her so he can notify the police.”

I grab the cell phone from his hands. “No. No police.”

He slams his hand against the steering wheel in frustration. “Silas, you have to tell them she's okay! This is ridiculous. You're both being completely ridiculous with this.”

I turn in my seat and stare at him pointedly. “Landon, you have to believe me. Charlie and I are going to forget everything we know in a little over twelve hours from now. I have to get her to a hotel so I can explain everything to her, and then I need time to make notes. If we notify the police, they

might split us up for questioning. I need to be with her when this happens again. I don't care if you don't believe me, but you're my brother and I need you to do this for me."

He doesn't respond to my request. We're at the end of the road now, and I can see the roll of his throat as he swallows, trying to decide whether to turn left or right.

"Please," I ask him. "I just need until tomorrow."

He releases a pent-up breath and then turns right—the opposite direction from our homes. I breathe a sigh of relief. "I owe you one."

"More like a million," he mutters.

I look in the back seat at Charlie, and she's staring at me, obviously terrified by what she's hearing.

"What do you mean this will happen again tomorrow?" she asks, her voice trembling.

I crawl into the back seat with her and pull her to me. She melts against my chest, and I can feel her heart racing against mine. "I'll explain everything at the hotel."

She nods, and then, "Did he call you Silas? Is that your name?"

Her voice is raspy, like she's screamed herself hoarse. I don't even want to think about what she's been through since yesterday.

"Yeah," I tell her, rubbing my hand up and down her arm. "Silas Nash."

"Silas," she says softly. "I've been wondering what your name was since yesterday."

I immediately stiffen and look down at her. "What do you mean you've been wondering? How do you remember me?"

"I dreamt about you."

She dreamt about me.

I pull my short list of notes from my pocket and ask Landon for a pen. He pulls one out of his console and hands it to me. I make a note about the dreams and how Charlie knew me without having memory of me. I also note that my own dream about her felt more like a memory. Could our dreams be clues to our past?

Charlie watches me as I write down everything that has transpired in the last hour. She never questions me, though. I fold the paper up and slide it back into my pocket.

"So what's the deal with us?" she asks. "Are we like...in love and shit?"

I laugh out loud for the first time since yesterday morning. "Yeah," I say, still laughing. "Apparently I've been in love and shit with you for eighteen years now."



I told Landon to come to our hotel room at eleven thirty tomorrow morning. If this happens again, we'll need time to adjust and read the notes to get acclimated to our situation. He was hesitant, but he finally agreed. He said he would tell Dad he's been out looking for us all day with no luck.

I feel bad for making people worry until tomorrow, but I'm not about to put myself in a situation where I let her out of my sight again. Hell, I wouldn't even let her shut the door when she said she wanted to take a shower. A *warm* shower, she clarified.

When we got to the hotel, I told her everything I knew. Which, once I laid it all out, didn't seem like much.

She told me what had happened to her since yesterday morning. I'm relieved it was nothing too serious, but disturbed that they were holding her in the basement. Why would The Shrimp and her mother be keeping Charlie against her will? The woman was obviously trying to mislead me yesterday when she told said, "*The answers to your questions lie with someone who is very close to you.*"

Yeah, I'd say. The person with answers was very close to me. A mere two feet away.

I feel like this information is one of the best leads we've gotten in the past week, but I have no idea why they were holding her captive. That's the first thing I want us to figure out tomorrow. Which is why I'm ensuring our notes are detailed and precise, so we can get an even better head start.

I've already made a note for Charlie to go to the police station and ask for all her belongings to be returned to her. They can't keep them now that she's no longer missing, and we desperately need those letters and journals. The key to everything could be written in there somewhere, and until it's all back in our possession, we're completely stuck.

The bathroom door opens wider, and I hear her walking toward the bed. I'm sitting at the desk, still writing notes. I glance up at her as she sits on the mattress, her feet dangling off the edge of the bed as she watches me.

I expected after her ordeal that she'd be more shaken up, but she's tough. She listened intently when I explained everything I knew, and she never once doubted me. She even threw out a few theories herself.

"Knowing me, I'll probably try to run tomorrow if I wake up in a hotel room with a guy I've never met," she says. "I should probably write myself a note and stick it over the door handle, telling myself to wait until at least noon before I hightail it out of here."

See? Tough *and* smart.

I hand her a piece of paper and a pen, and she writes herself a note and then walks it to the hotel room door.

"We should try to get some sleep," I tell her. "If this does happen again, we need to be well rested."

She nods in agreement and climbs onto the bed. I didn't even bother asking for two beds. I don't know why. Not that I have any ideas about how the night's going to play out. I think I'm just extremely protective of her. The thought of not knowing she's right next to me makes me too uncomfortable, even if it would have been a different bed just two feet away.

I set the alarm for ten thirty in the morning. That'll give us time to wake up and prepare, while hopefully giving us a good six hours of sleep. I turn out the lights and crawl into bed beside her.

She's on her side and I'm on mine, and I'm doing everything I can to not scoot over and spoon her, or at least put my arm around her. I don't want to freak her out, though, but it also somehow feels natural for me to do those things.

I fluff my pillow and turn it over so the colder side is against my cheek. I face the wall and keep my back to her to make sure she doesn't feel uncomfortable having to share a bed with me.

"Silas?" she whispers.

I like her voice. It's comforting yet electric. "Yeah?"

I can feel her roll over to face me, but my back is still to her. "I don't know why, but I feel like we'll both sleep better if you have your arms around me. Not touching you seems more awkward than touching you."

Even though it's dark in the room, I try to fight my smile. I immediately roll over, and she scoots back against my chest. I wrap my arm around her and pull her closer—her body curving perfectly into mine—her feet locking around my feet.

This.

This must have been why I felt an unwavering need to find her. Because until this very second, I didn't know Charlie wasn't the only one missing. When she disappeared, part of me must have disappeared right along with her. Because this is the first time I feel like me—like Silas Nash—since the second I woke up yesterday.

She finds my hand in the dark and slides her fingers through mine. "Are you scared, Silas?"

I sigh, hating that she's falling asleep thinking about it. "I'm worried," I tell her. "I don't want it to happen again. But I'm not scared, because this time I know where you are."

If it were possible to hear a smile, hers would be a love song.

“Goodnight, Silas,” she says quietly.

Her shoulders rise and fall when she lets out a deep sigh. Her breathing begins to taper off after only a few minutes, and I know she’s asleep.

Before I close my eyes, she readjusts her position slightly and I catch a glimpse of her tattoo. The silhouette of trees is peeking out of the top of the back of her shirt.

I wish there was a letter that would have described the night we got these tattoos. I would give anything to have that memory back—to see what it was like between us when we loved each other enough to believe it was forever.

Maybe I’ll dream about that night if I fall asleep thinking about it.

I close my eyes, knowing this is exactly how it’s supposed to be.

Charlie and Silas.

Together.

I don’t know why we ever started drifting apart, but I’m certain of one thing: I’ll never allow it to happen again.

I press a soft kiss into her hair. Something I’ve probably done a million times, but the drunken, one-winged moths fluttering around in my stomach make it feel like the very first time.

“Goodnight, Charlie baby.”



I wake up to sunlight.

It's streaming through the window and warming my face. I roll over to look for Silas, but his pillow is empty.

For a moment, I'm afraid that he's left me, or that someone has taken him. But then I hear the clink of a cup and the sound of him moving. I squeeze my eyes shut gratefully. I can smell food. I roll over.

"Breakfast," he says. I crawl out of bed feeling self-conscious about the way I must look. I comb my fingers through my hair and wipe the sleep from my eyes. Silas is sitting at the desk, sipping on coffee and writing something down on paper.

I pull up a chair and seat myself across from him and grab a croissant, tucking my hair behind my ears. I don't want to eat, but I do anyway. He wants us to be well rested and fed before the clock strikes 11:00 am. But my stomach is full of nerves, thinking about how it felt waking up with no memory two days ago. I don't want that to happen again. I didn't like it then, and I won't like it this time.

Every few seconds, he glances up at me and our eyes lock before he goes back to work. He looks nervous too.

After the croissant, I eat bacon, then the eggs, then a bagel. I finish off Silas's coffee, drink my orange juice, and push my chair back from the table. He smiles and taps the side of his mouth. I reach up and dust the crumbs off my face, feeling warmth rise to my cheeks. He's not laughing at me though. I know that.

He hands me a toothbrush still in its package and follows me to the bathroom. We brush our teeth together, eyeing each other in the mirror. His hair is standing on end, and mine is tangled. It's sort of comical. I can't believe I'm in the same room as the boy from my dreams. It feels surreal.

I look at the clock as we leave the bathroom. We have ten minutes to go. Silas has his notes ready, as do I. We lay them out on the bed so it's all circling us. Everything we know is here. This time is going to be different. We're together. We have Landon. We're going to figure this thing out.

We sit, facing each other on the bed, our knees touching. From where I sit, I can see the red letters of the alarm clock hit 10:59.

One minute. My heart is racing.

I'm so afraid.

I begin the countdown in my head. 59...58...57...56...

I count down to thirty, and Silas suddenly leans forward. His hands cup my face. I can smell him; feel his breath on my lips.

I lose the time. I have no idea what second I'm supposed to be on.
“Never never,” he whispers. His warmth, his lips, his hands.
He presses his mouth to mine and kisses me deeply and I...

To be continued...

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