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*University of Utah*

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH JOURNAL

**IF I SHOULD DIE BEFORE I WAKE**

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## ABSTRACT

In my senior year at the University of Utah, I edited and improved upon the novel I wrote in the Honors Novel Writing Workshop course taught by Michael Gills. My novel *If I Should Die Before I Wake* is the story of a young woman named Emma meeting a young man named Cale by coincidence, and how they struggle through their individual trials while also growing stronger together. The two both go on journeys of self-discovery and exploration while also providing strength, support, and insight for the other. In this thesis I will delve into the intricacies of novel writing in general as well as my own personal experience in writing and becoming a novelist. I believe that truly exploring the methods and mental fortitude of working on a novel through multiple drafts is important to understanding much of myself and the humanities as a whole. The complexities of writing and experiencing through the eyes of characters and providing that experience for others is unique and extraordinary.

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## INTRODUCTION

When I was touring colleges around the country, visiting campus, collecting countless pamphlets, and listening to infinite spiels, the University of Utah stuck out to me for two reasons. First, I loved how the honors college had a super cool Outdoor Leadership living and learning community, and second, that there was a year-long novel writing course. There were other reasons as well, but those two really stuck with me. When it came time to apply for the honors novel writing course I did have my doubts. *Could I do this? How skilled would my other classmates be?* But I applied. I interviewed. I was accepted. Even the summer before the class when I was planning what I would write I started to doubt myself. Could I really write a novel? It always seemed like something I could do, in the future, someday. But I went to the first class, wrote my first ten pages, and worked and worked and worked. Before I knew it, I had one hundred pages, two hundred, and a finished first draft. I did it.

When I was brainstorming for my novel I had so many ideas. I was bouncing all over in the imagination of it all. Eventually, I settled on some sort of young love. I started scheming what my plot milestones would be, how it would feel, who my characters were, and it was exciting. I created my two main characters Emma Davis and Cale Martin from me at different points in my life. I thought the only way for me to create believable characters would be to base them on myself. It's a little strange to think about two versions of myself falling in love with the other, but that's why I emphasize *based on*. Emma would be the hopeful, optimistic person who sees the best in everything and has worked through her issues already and would just be struggling to find her future. Cale would be incomplete and utter denial, avoiding any questions and staying true to the path he chose for himself. The two were destiny. But as I was getting

some more detailed planning done, I was hit by the sudden realization that the story I had been formulating wouldn't be a happy one. Emma and Cale's story together wouldn't be that picture-perfect happily ever after. That was perhaps the first moment I experienced the novel guiding me toward an answer. It was never my plan to end their love so tragically until the story and characters convinced me it was. The novel took on a life of its own from its conception until the day I wrote the last words on that final page.

My novel, currently titled *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, is a book that will be told in five parts and will follow two main characters. The first part is focused on how the two main characters, Emma and Cale, first meet and how they end up missing their chance. Both of them feel regret about missing out on what they both felt could have been something special. Also, we learn that Emma has a conflict of what path she wishes to take in the future, specifically with her major. Cale knows exactly what he wants to do, but might be unable to achieve his goals since in this first part we learn that he has congenital heart disease. Both have conflicts individually and in their mutual relationship.

The second part is about our two characters getting a second chance with one another. Due to outside influences, Cale is forced to get coffee and a new coffee shop, which is where Emma often frequents. They meet again and together go on a march for climate change awareness. Sparks fly until Emma is struck with a migraine and has to leave. Cale takes care of her and they exchange contact information.

Part three follows the beginnings of a relationship. Cale and Emma grow closer, becoming ever more important to the other person. They go on dates, study, and spend time together constantly. Things really start to look up for the two of them, until Cale shares with Emma about his sickness. They get into a huge fight about it since Cale won't admit the seriousness of the issue and Emma can't stand his denial and blatant disregard for his own life.

The fourth part follows them going separate ways for their winter breaks. The pair is distanced not just emotionally from their fight but also physically as they go back to their families for vacation. But it ends with the two reconciling and growing stronger together. They realize that they can be each other's strength.

The fifth and final part surrounds an accident. Emma receives a terminal head injury and as per her final wish, we learn that her heart is compatible with Cale. And Cale receives her heart before he knows that it's hers. Cale is given a new shot at life all because of Emma. She became his strength and now motivates him to remain true to himself and never waste a moment of his life and that he should do everything he can to leave the world better than he found it.

### **Research and Real-World Roots**

From the very start, I knew that I would need to do some in-depth research. Especially since I wanted to give Cale Martin congenital heart disease. A real disease that affects real people. I had to dive in deep. And I learned that as I answered my initial questions new questions would immediately fill their place. Before exploring congenital heart disease and heart transplants for my book I never realized just how much you need to dig to find the truth and the understanding you need to do something justice. Even with a finished novel I still believe I need to go back and discover more. Every single detail matters, while yes this is fiction, it's real. It's real-life with real emotions and I wanted it to feel as authentic as possible.

One of the most important lessons I took away from the novel-writing workshop was how to intertwine your truth as the author with the book's truth. The best way to create the authenticity I mentioned earlier is to use the experiences that you've really had in order to connect the false with the real. With that delicate balance, a writer can masterfully make even the wildest concepts feel tangible and true. As I wrote about the senses that I had experienced, one of my classmates told me that they loved my line "to thaw would be to burn." That line was taken

from a real-life experience when I went sledding without my gloves and the burning sensation that came with warming my hands up again. It was one of my favorite lines too. The phrase meant something completely different for the character and the reader, however, the truthfulness of the line can be felt universally because I was attempting to blend my reality with the fiction.

Beyond the sensory descriptions and character experiences and memory, which I drew from my intrinsic memories. I also was greatly inspired by real places for my settings. While the main city and college setting of my novel, Providence, Oregon, and the school Burton College were fabricated locations, I drew my inspiration from real places. I was inspired by trips I had taken to Spokane and Walla Walla, Washington. I drew from my time in those places to create Providence, Oregon. I also took a majority of the design for Burton College from Whitworth University in Spokane. I attempted to ground the fiction of my novel with the reality of the real world throughout the novel. I even used extremely literal references to specific songs, events, and neighborhoods such as Sugar House in Salt Lake City.

### **The Workshop Process**

I will never forget my very first workshop with this group. I was expecting critique but I was also anticipating praise. I thought for everything I was told I should change or improve on, I'd at least get one good thing I was doing as well. In my August 2020 naivety, I was gravely mistaken. In my first thirty-minute workshop I was accused of being insensitive to certain demographics, told my plans were *too* much for me, and not once did I hear a single good thing. I was heartbroken, to say the least, and in all honesty, I did cry, in the classroom, in the bathroom after class, the walk home, and in my room long after. All the expectations I had were shattered. I didn't think my first twenty pages were perfect but I thought they were better than the response I got back from people. I was floundering for a very long time. I caught myself searching for what writing would make my classmates happy. *What would they like? How could I get praise*

*again?* They were dangerous toxic thoughts. I also wanted to give up. If there was nothing about my novel that anyone liked so far then what was I doing? I felt as though I was left stranded without a foothold or anything to hold on to. *Should I start over? Drop the class?*

It was in that first week after my initial workshop that I grew as a person. Not just a writer, but as a human. Firstly, I shouldn't seek affirmation from others. If I were to live my life only surviving on the confidence other people gave me I wouldn't last a day. I needed to learn to find myself. That was eye-opening. Secondly, I need to be able to take what critiques moved *me* and ignore the critiques that didn't. I had to learn that I was writing this novel for no one but myself. In twenty years would I care what one person thought of my book? No. Would I care if what I wrote was something I was proud of? Yes. I needed to figure out what would make *me* proud of *my* work.

There is a delicate balance between being overly prideful in one's own work and in being proud of one's hard work. After my first workshop, I established that new balance. I found my self-confidence while also embracing my errors, flaws, and weaknesses.

I know that sounds like a lot to have learned in a week, but it's the truth. It wasn't easy for me to learn either. To be completely frank, that was a really shitty week. I was plagued with self-doubt, I kept wanting to give up, and I really didn't want to show my face again in that class after crying so much. But I kept going. I kept writing. And I am so happy that I did.

In the year-long course, I was surrounded by really gifted peers. Each and every one of them will go on to do such amazing things, I can't help but feel like I was the weakest link of the group, but if anything that was what continued to push me forward. As I was surrounded by so many smart, intelligent, and talented people I was able to learn from all of them. The peer system is spectacular because I was never alone in this whole process. There were always others surrounding me encouraging me, and teaching me, even if they didn't know it. I was always



watching and observing other people's processes as well as my own. I wanted to learn as they were learning. Perhaps they were struggling with something I hadn't tried yet, just because I hadn't faced that issue yet didn't mean I wouldn't. Their complications were mine and vice versa.

There was nothing more gratifying or as terrifying as the moment one of my reading partners was assigned to present my novel and their findings on my novel to the class. It was surreal hearing my plot, my characters, and my story getting explained by someone else. The moment of hearing my words through their voice made everything I was doing feel all the more real. This wasn't just a story I was writing for myself in the darkness of 4:30 in the morning, this was something that people could read and experience just like I could. There was something so special about that instance. If it wasn't for the workshop aspect of the class, I probably would have always been too scared to ever share my work. But because I had the push from like-minded reading partners who were reading as I was writing I feel so much more comfortable with my work.

One of the highlights of the workshop was getting the chance to experience the Association of Writers and Writing Programs' 2021 conference. The AWP Writers' Conference of 2021 was absolutely astounding. Even online there were innumerable connections and moments of intimate community. Before the start of every single panel, you would have people signing in to the chat box with a "Hello from" and suddenly it wasn't just me, a nameless student behind a screen, but *me* an honors writer from the University of Utah who is in the middle of drafting my first novel among countless others just like me from all over the country. This feeling of community was something I had no idea I had been so desperately searching for in an era of thankless keyboards and faceless gray squares. It was spectacular.

In the five days of constant panels, I can honestly say that I not only grew as a writer but as a person as well. For seven years I have been struggling, alone, with my autoimmune disease, and in the span of thirty minutes at a panel titled, "Postcards from My Bed: How Autoimmunity Shapes Form, Practice, and Career," I was given the validation and satisfaction I needed. Again, AWP solidified for me a community. I was no longer fighting my fight alone and that moment of alleviated loneliness isn't so easily summarized in a few words, but it meant so much to me as a human struggling alone in the world, hiding from the scary truths and avoiding awkward conversations. I grew at this conference into someone who isn't afraid to ask questions, or meet new people, or have difficult conversations.

Through panels such as "Let's Get Digital," "The Cultural Contours of Grief," and "Compelling Plots: From the First Draft to Publishing and Marketing," I learned how to take criticism not just constructively but also *strategically*. I understood that it's ok to embrace your real pain and life struggles and work through the unnameable feelings and bottomless tears with the written word. I asked the questions about the professional writing world that I could never find the answers to and made important connections and reached out about internships and professional insights. Giving me the networking and abilities to continue to succeed in a career post-college.

I am so beyond grateful for the opportunity to hear from so many amazing writers and people. Mostly from strong, intellectual, and diverse women. Almost all of the panels I happened to attend were run and consisted of women. Which was, unfortunately, a surprise, but it made me even more inspired. To see women, like me, working hard in a field more often than not dominated by men. They were doing it, so why couldn't I?

The AWP conference of 2021 was more than I ever expected and I can honestly say that I will never forget any of the panels, lessons, and moments of those five days for years to come.

And I am absolutely certain that I will be reaping the rewards from the wisdom imparted to me for the rest of my life.

### **Writing Everyday**

Physically writing every single day was immensely challenging. Getting up every day at 4:30 am even more so. At the same time, these early mornings in the darkness, with the silence, and nothing but my fellow writers announcing their presence on Canvas every morning, was magical. It was exhausting, don't get me wrong. But there was something special about those early morning hours. That was something that made this workshop even more special. It brought the entire workshop together. We would continue to check in with each other throughout the day on those same Canvas discussions sharing our struggles, both personal and writing-wise. Each and every one of us helped each other out. Whether it was tangible examples and explanations on how to solve a certain writing problem, or just cheering each other on after a difficult day.

One of the most difficult parts of this novel writing workshop was not looking back or editing anything. I knew the reason behind it, but I couldn't shake the feeling for a long time that my reading partner would be *reading* those pages that I wrote at 4:30 in the morning with no double-checking. It was uncomfortable to let the imperfections be, and then be witnessed and judged by a peer. To be honest it was embarrassing at first. Eventually, those walls and awkward barriers broke down and left me feeling so much more comfortable with my writing and safe with my peer group. I think allowing those mistakes to exist was actually extremely freeing. In a world where we are constantly told to be perfect, to hide those errors, to not show the gaps we have in our knowledge, it was like a weight being lifted off our shoulders to finally be allowed to breathe.

It was okay to not be perfect. It was okay.

I believe that that room I was given to grow is why I was able to become who I am now. Pre-workshop I was afraid, I was filled with doubt, and I wanted to please everyone. Post-workshop I am secure in being myself, I embrace myself, and I no longer feel that smothering pressure to please each and every person and forget who I am in the process. I let myself make mistakes now.

After I finished the first draft of my novel I was happy, but I was also incredibly sad. While I love sleeping past 5:30 am, I longed to write again. I actually wanted to go back to writing every day. Even now as I write this analysis of my writing experience, I want to write a book. I miss having that project. I didn't think I would. But here I am. I'm officially a writing addict now. I crave my fingers tapping on the keys, I want that moment when I write a really cool sentence, I miss my mess of sticky notes on the wall that I would write in my sleep-deprived delirium with the best ideas I ever had. Moving forward, I think I am going to be a writer for the rest of my life.

### **The Second Draft**

Going into my second draft, I began by reading and editing a hard copy. It sounds like it might be easier than the writing portion. However, nothing was harder than going back and reading my work. It was scary. To return to where it all began, to find errors, inconsistencies, embarrassing typos, and so much more. But I read every single word.

One of the most interesting things I noticed in my reading of my work was how little I had changed. I was worried that I wouldn't remember what my past self was thinking as I wrote, that I would lose something important in that way, but I was shocked. As I read I would think to myself, *ah a joke like this would do well here*, only to discover that I had already made the same joke in the next line. In a way, it was like having a conversation with myself and traveling back in time, yet it wasn't as scary as I had thought it would be. It was oddly comforting.

On the flip side, I realized the many changes I would have to make. Some of the key things were, showing and not telling, maintaining tense, and developing the emotions between the two main love interests more. I also changed the organization of my novel. My original plan was to separate the parts with a short story that tangentially influenced the main plot, but I decided in my second draft to focus more on the five stages of grief. It was definitely a change. However, I think it made for a more cohesive novel. It was also a really fun creative exercise, adding and developing my own definitions for these common terms. I also decided to format these pages to look like a dictionary which meant I needed the phonetic spellings. In my drafting process, I checked with a phonetics student at the University of Utah applying for the Audiology program to assist me and make sure that the phonetic spellings were accurate.

Once I had goals in place, and a new outline created surrounding this new draft, it was time to start writing. Many people would assume that the rational, easy, and clear route would be to duplicate my original file and then make edits on that document, but when do writers ever choose the *easy* path? Never. So instead I retyped the entire novel, word for word. While painstaking, it was incredibly beneficial. Since I was typing the entire novel again anyway I was never hesitant to make changes I just went for it. It was so rewarding.

When I finished my second draft I was satisfied. I put in the work that I wanted to put in, and I knew that my novel was stronger because of it. But I never felt done. Perhaps a writer's job is never finished, but mine definitely wasn't after my second draft. So, on to the third.

## **The Future**

Even though I've finished two drafts of my first draft of my novel *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, I am far from being done. As I mentioned earlier, now that I've started writing, I don't think that I can stop. Now that I've started this project I don't think I can just stop after the second draft. I want to keep pushing it. Maybe even try and get it published eventually. Because

why not? Being a part of this workshop has taught me that I am entirely capable of doing whatever I set my mind to. I can do it.

While terrifying, I do love the idea of young people out in the world reading my novel. I think I want that. So I am going to do it. And while it sounds like an insane amount of work that completely terrifies me, I'm going to do it. If I'm going to finish this project, I'm going to do it the right way. With all the elbow grease, blood, sweat, and tears. I am actually excited about that.

I will be a writer for the remainder of my life. I'm hooked. I have learned so much about myself in this workshop. It has been hard, grueling, and emotionally difficult work, but each letter on those documents was worth it. Every tear I cried after my first workshop was worth it. I would do it all over again. I feel almost as if this workshop operated on my training wheels for writing. I am afraid to take them off, they're comfortable, secure, and safe. But I have been given the skills and abilities to attempt the rest of this journey outside the safety of the honors center. I can do it. I will do it.

THE NOVEL

*If I Should Die Before I Wake*  
By  
Hailey Danielson

To all the people who told me that I'd write a novel one day.  
Yours are the voices that pushed me onward.



**Grief** /grif/

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1: deep sadness due to the immense loss of a person or thing.

2: an extreme sadness

3: informal: a hindrance or nuisance

## PROLOGUE

*January 2021 — One Year Later*

The air stilled, crisp with a harsh mid-winter anger. It silently clawed at his face as he walked clumsily forward, begging him to stop, asking him to give into his desires to stop. He really wanted to stop moving, to turn around, and leave. But he wouldn't, he *couldn't*. A beat in his heart urged him to continue on. So he did. His nose tinged with red as it fought hard against the cruel bite of brutal chill. The breath that leaked from his mouth flew away from him in escape, as if the oxygen of his lungs was even more cowardly than he was. He didn't blame it for escaping. The most guilt and regret ridden parts of him longed to do the same.

He reached the clearing, stepping out from the ominous trees that were glaring down at him like a criminal who got away with murder, their withered stares grated on his soul. No one felt more guilty than he did. No one. But there was nowhere to place that guilt, all that blame. It couldn't leave, nor did it really have the right to leave. It was all deserved, exactly where it should be.

While he was lost in his head, all sound ceased to exist, whether that was his doing or from the retaliation of nature, he was unsure. But no matter its cause, it left him alone with his shaky breaths and snowy foot falls. Not a bird scuffled through the branches of the spiteful trees, not a gust of wind carried the noise pollution of nearby cars or roadways. Just silence. Still air. Stagnance.

There was always something so satisfying about the sound of snow crunching and compacting, yet also incredibly grating at the same time. Perhaps that encompassed everything

about this situation. He needed to be here, needed to face his demons and his angels, yet it was vastly uncomfortable. So incredibly uncomfortable.

He could now see his destination in front of him. He was so close. But he staggered. Hit with sudden feelings of panic, triggering his fight or flight. He wanted to leave. He shouldn't be here. He wasn't ready. This was all wrong. No.

*I'll always protect you*

His heart lurched, bringing him back to himself, guiding him. Giving him permission to finish this journey.

With a shake of his head, he pushed through his walls, slowly, but he did.

One foot in front of the other.

He stared at his feet the remainder of the journey. To lie to himself and trick his mind into thinking he was somewhere else, anywhere else.

He stopped when he noticed the large vase of flowers resting on the ground in front of him.

Fresh.

Her family must have visited earlier. They were lovely chrysanthemums of all different colors. So lively, stunning. Just like she was.

Was.

With a breath he crystalized his conviction.

This was it.

He had made a vow to himself that he would make it to her grave.

All that was left was a small tilt of his head, to look her way.

But why was this last part so hard? He owed it to her to look her way. He was working so hard to do right by her. To see her and thank her and live as she would have wanted. But god, he wasn't brave enough. He was still the same awful selfish human he was a year ago.

Hot tears started heating his cheeks as he continued to stare at the chrysanthemums made brighter by the clear white snow surrounding them.

Emma, why aren't you here? You should be here.

Just as his body went on autopilot and began to turn away he felt it.

Calm and support.

He didn't have to think twice to know with certainty that it was her. She was here. She was supporting him, and she would help him get through this.

He took a shaky tear filled breath, the cool air tingled the back of his throat waking him up.

With a new found resilience he made that final move, that final adjustment in his posture to face the one thing he wanted to deny above all others.

The headstone was the same as it had been a year before. A stunning dark granite that glinted in the morning sunlight. And the words "Emma Davis" followed by "Sister, Daughter, Friend." And those dates. Dates that would forever be too close together: "1998-2020."

Oh Emma.

I'm so sorry.

I miss you.

I need you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Seeing her final place, he finally allowed himself to feel all those bundled up emotions at once. His knees crashed into the soft white snow beneath him and he sobbed while repeating the same phrase over and over again.

Thank you.

**Denial and Isolation** /dɪˈniəl/ /aɪˈsɪleɪʃən/

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1 Denial: not allowing an occurrence to take place

2 Denial: to refute a fact or truth despite the way that it is logically irrefutable

1 Isolation: to hide

2 Isolation: Loneliness

## Chapter One

### *Emma*

At 7 o'clock on a Friday night Emma was enjoying her night in and relishing in her lack of plans and wired bra. She was finishing up some notes and homework for her classes before she would watch a movie or maybe some trashy reality television show on her extremely out of date television. Yeah, that was the dream.

Her apartment was quiet, the complex was the perfect distance away from the Burton college campus so that it didn't house many college students; the apartments were mostly filled with young working people or elderly couples. Not that she had a problem with college students, she was in fact also a college student, however, even she enjoyed her peaceful quiet time, which you just can't replicate in a college dormitory.

As she diligently worked at her well-loved desk, she was surrounded by her knick-knacks, photos of her dads and her sister, and mementos from previous family vacations. Her apartment was just her. A small one bedroom apartment that she paid for with the help of her parents. It was much cheaper to live there instead of on campus as well. It had a small kitchen that looked over her living room, a clean and neat bathroom, and her bedroom. One of her favorite parts of the space though would have to be her balcony located just off the living room. She could sit out there and people watch while she drank her classic chai tea latte that she gets from her go to coffee shop down the street.

She was lucky.

Just as she finished scribbling her final note, her phone started ringing and *Moonlight Sonata* filled the space.

Emma quickly grabbed her device and gracefully slid across the green answer arrow.

“Hello—”

“EMMA I’M RUNNING TOWARDS YOUR BUILDING”

Emma laughed quietly to herself. As her out of breath friend continued screaming into her phone, “I’m going to need you to let me in three”

Oh a countdown.

Emma decided to play along.

She jumped up from her desk and ran to her doorway, yanked the door brutally open and sprinted down the hallway. Apparently her friend would need to be buzzed in, in about two seconds.

“Two!” The countdown continued.

Emma felt the rush of adrenaline as her feet pounded into her soft carpet beneath her.

“One!” The voice shouted just as Emma’s graceful fingers grazed the intercom’s button. The distinct buzzing sound echoed on the other end of the line, signalling that all had gone off without a hitch.

Emma leaned on the wall opposite the intercom and slid down to the floor. With her head resting on her knees she laughed.

Ashley was her best friend since they both had creative writing together their freshman year. She was loud, outgoing, and incredibly spontaneous. Together they had balance. Ashley was the instinct while Emma was the reason. Ash the fantasy while Emma was the reality.

Knocking on her door woke her from her thoughts, it was definitely Ash.

With a grin adorning her face she jumped up and opened the door. Ash greeted her and quickly came inside.

“Mission successful” she declared.

With a shake of her blonde head Emma chuckled, “Ash, what are you up to?”

The tan Italian goddess, wearing a black body con dress and a matching leather jacket, sitting in front of her answered mischievously, “Well, I’m so glad that you asked. We” she paused gesturing between the two of them, “are going to a Barton sanctioned party on campus at the student union building tonight.”

“Oh are we now?”

“Yes, and I had you run to give you a little thrill and adrenaline for a warm up. Are you awake?”

“Yes, I am most definitely awake, but I’m not sure if I want to go out tonight.”

Ash pouted at her reclusive words.

Emma sighed, it wasn’t that she hated going out, in fact she liked going out. Well, she liked going out when it was a planned excursion where she could prepare herself in every way possible. Spontaneity was not her forte.

“Ash, I’m in my pajamas and my apartment is very comfortable at the moment, why should I give that up?”

The friend across from her gave her a side eye before answering, “who said you needed to change out of your pjs?”

Going to a party in her green junior high era sweatpants, a black tank, sports bra uniboob, and an ancient jacket didn’t give her a lot of confidence, but Ash had a point, she didn’t have to change necessarily.

After a moment’s hesitation she relinquished, Ash wouldn’t give in anytime soon anyway, “Alright, I’ll go.”

Before she even finished her sentence Ash started dancing and screeching.

“Yes! Thank you so much Em! You are not gonna regret this, it’s gonna be an amazing night, I can just feel it.”



Ash came closer to give Emma an awkward hug out of sheer excitement before tacking on, “also can I do your hair?”

Thirty minutes later, four homework assignments lighter, and hair much curlier, Emma and Ash arrived at the school sponsored party. Every quarter at Burton College the student government threw a party in the student union building, it was never anything too exciting, there was a DJ, maybe a few small activities. It was also not the *cool* place to be since no alcohol was allowed in, but for Emma that just meant no rude frat boys, which in fact made this party very cool indeed.

After Emma parked her extremely average silver sedan in the small parking lot outside, the pair started walking toward the party. Even outside they could hear the bass pumping indoors.

“You excited?” Ash squealed.

With a winning smile she responded, “ah yes so excited.”

Not satisfied with her answer Ash poked Emma’s cheek, “try again.”

“I’m actually very excited,” she said calmly but genuinely. No sarcasm in sight.

“Good. Now let’s go!”

Ash gripped Emma’s hand tight and pulled her towards the building’s entrance. It wasn’t a very exciting building, at first glance it would be easily seen as built in the 1970’s, with the trademark rock walls and layout.

Once they crossed the threshold the music grew even louder, some song from 2016 that everyone knew but hadn’t listened to in a long time. The dance floor must have been in a room further to the right. They were in a large entryway, filled with more balloons, banners, and colored red with a fun lighting machine.

After checking in at the check-in table Emma started to feel a little giddy. Yes she looked silly with her pajamas, but her hair was beautifully curled thanks to Ash, and she was actually feeling excited to dance. She turned to face Ash and saw her friend taking in her surroundings with a look of awe. Ash looked so happy to be there, her face lit up just taking in all the decorations and people. In that moment Emma realized how much her energetic and extroverted friend held back for her. The girl was just so confident and carefree, the type of person who finds a way to have a good time no matter what, but maybe she didn't want to go to events like this one alone. Emma felt guilty for avoiding events like this in the past, and made a silent vow to attend more events with Ash in the future. She needed to be a better friend.

“Ash,” Emma got her friend's attention.

Breaking out of the fantasy, Ash spun to her, “yeah?”

“Thank you so much for doing my hair, I really love it, and” she paused, gathering all her bravado, “I would like to do more stuff like this with you in the future.”

She could only watch and listen as Ash graced the world with a god awful entirely new noise, that could only be described as a mix between air leaking out of a balloon and a boiling tea kettle.

“Do you really want to?” Ash asked excitedly.

“I really do.”

“Well,” Ash turned away from Emma, “you haven't even seen the party yet. Let's go” and together they ran towards the dance floor's siren call.

Ash led them down countless hallways, down narrow paths, through countless twists and turns, carefully dodging the bodies of countless, and seemingly endless party people. Like a fun house, Emma could feel herself getting lost, feeling the world distorting itself, the party lights were constantly shifting the colors on the wall, changing from blues to purples to reds. They

were passing countless partiers, all with their own lives, and their own reasons for being there. As they walked the sound of the dance floor grew steadily closer, but with the louder tunes also came the increased scent of banned booze and rank B.O.

Excellent.

When the sound seemed like it couldn't get any closer, they made one final turn and landed in the ballroom that hosted the party they'd been searching for. The ballroom was cavernous, with tall ceilings, at least twenty feet high, adorned with classic chandeliers which seemed out of place. There were more disco and color shifting lights, but these changed more rapidly, sometimes completely on beat with the music. There was a large stage up at the front of the room, the opposite side from Emma and Ash, and between them was a mass of people so large it reminded Emma of a school of fish, the way appeared to sway and move in sync with one another, even though they were all just following the same musical cues.

"Wow" she whispered.

Ash responded with a friendly elbow to her side, "Ready to join the crowd?"

She took a moment to close her eyes. This was a far cry from her night in that she had been planning on. A far cry. But she was here now. In he pajamas, which was slightly embarrassing, but she was choosing to focus on the comfortable aspect of them at the moment. She could feel the beat of the music pound in her ears, feel the melody thrum through her feet, and feel the lyrics beg to be released from her mouth. She was here, and she wanted to party.

She took a breath before answering, "Hell yes!" Emma shouted toward her friend.

Ash nodded and then they ran into the moshing masses, laughing the whole time.

The pair pushed their way towards the front of the crowd but ended up close to the middle. The music was starting to muffle Emma's ears, and the heat from everyone's movements were really making her regret the sweatpant statement. But she allowed herself to jump, sway,

and spin with the music. She screamed the lyrics to every song she knew, and even some of the songs she didn't know, because the loudness of the atmosphere allowed her the freedom to say and sing whatever she wanted, she was surrounded by people but she felt even safer screaming into the crowd than she usually did singing in her own bathroom. She couldn't really dance all too well, but she was good at jumping. And jump she did, like a child playing on a trampoline she would occasionally find the perfect rhythm that would make her fly. So she flew.

Dancing felt like that moment of weightlessness after jumping just right on a trampoline, it reminded her of that moment, at the peak of the jump, when she thinks she might just keep going and nothing will stop her.

“Em!”

“Yeah?” Emma spun to face her friend, responding to her yell with her own, the music blasting, making their screams feel like whispers.

“You're killing it!” Ash shouted with a wink. The wink was more than just a wink though. It was a thanks, a thanks for joining her, a wink to cheer her on, a wink that tethered their friendship to one another. It made Emma's heart buzz with joy. She was so glad that she came out. Even if it was in her pajamas.

With each beat of the music, Emma issued herself a challenge, to jump higher, reach further, touch the ceilings, grab the stars. The curls of her hair furled and recoiled with her bouncing in their own rhythm. Laughter spilled from her mouth as the rest of the world faded away, everyone around her was moving in slow motion, unable to keep up with her pace.

“Emma, you look like you're having fun!” Ash exclaimed.

Exhausted from all her 'dancing' if anyone would call it that, all she could do was nod breathlessly. She really was having the most spectacular time. The air smelled like youth and

good mistakes, the music reverberated in her teeth, her hair, and to her toes. It was all so electrifying.

She often thought of her social life in terms of inertia, while she enjoyed both staying in and going out, she really didn't like changing her velocity. If she was still, then she was more than content to remain that way, unmoving. But once she started moving it would be difficult to stop her, she felt unstoppable.

An object in motion.

Tends to remain in motion.

Unless acted upon by an outside force.

The room around her suddenly started to tilt. It was strange, rooms don't usually tilt like that. But mid jump the world spun on its axis. Wait. No. It wasn't the world that was tilting. It was her. In her euphoric revelry some passerby must have knocked her over, and now she was falling.

It occurred to her that she was incredibly aware of her precarious position, yet she felt powerless to save herself from her less than favorable fate. As if it was all predestined, she was unable to catch herself, and accepted that she would in fact die by falling on a dance floor. How embarrassing, she resigned herself. Slowly her eyes closed, yes she would hit the floor with a very embarrassing thud, and yes people would awkwardly watch her do so, but that didn't mean that she needed to witness it.

*Goodbye world, it was nice knowing you.*

The time ticked by.

Moments passed.

But no thud sounded, she felt no pain, and she didn't feel like she was falling anymore.

There had been no impact.

Her eyes blinked open, the world was still tilted, but it was frozen at that same angle. Before she had the chance to fall someone had caught her. That was when she noticed the sensation of strong hands on her back. Those hands gracefully lifted her back up to a standing position, one remained on her shoulder as she spun to face her mysterious savior.

“Thank you,” she said softly, trailing off as she got a good look at him.

“Of course,” the at least six-foot tall adonis in front of her answered, “are you okay?”

It was in that instant that Emma came crashing back to reality. She began taking a mental checklist of her appearance. Green junior high era sweatpants, still on. Tank top with an old sports bra and uni-boob, check. Hair... what once used to be beautiful curls... were now disastrously ruined in a tangled sweaty mess. *Oh god.* Emma tried to casually sniff her armpit—*oh goddd*— It was bad. Why in her over planning, over thinking brain, did she not anticipate meeting cute people? She instantly regretted everything.

All she could do was nod, “yeah—” she cut herself off, *did she even brush her teeth today?*

Shoot.

Perfect. Just lovely.

She gave herself a good mental shake. Her throat cleared and she tried again, “Yeah I’m totally fine, this stuff happens all the time.”

*AHHHH Happens all the time?? What was she saying?*

The awkward conversation she was having with the gorgeous guy in front of her was so much worse than if she had actually just fallen to the ground in front of everyone. In fact, the way she was carrying this conversation was worse than if she had fallen in front of everyone on the dance floor four times in a row.

While she was doing mental jumping jacks and spiraling in regret, the young man in front of her started to laugh, breaking her out of her mental crisis and internal screaming.

She gave him another once over. He had sandy brown hair, his skin was tanned from being in the sun, upon further inspection she noticed that his cheekbones were sprinkled with freckles. Just above his freckles was the showstopper, his eyes. They were the most stunning cool blue color. Perhaps there was a hint of gray that added to their intensity. But they were so vivid, so alive. It made her catch her breath. And as he laughed at her poor joke the corners of his eyes crinkled and his soft looking messy hair tilted back as his head bounced with his laughter. It was a whole body, genuine laugh. The sound was so full, like it could fill any space, even a horribly awkward one.

“Good to know,” he said with a kind smile, he paused for a moment almost unsure until he added, “would you like to go get some air with me?”

As soon as he said that, Emma was hit with a new awareness of how hot the air was around them and suddenly the atmosphere felt stifling. She wanted nothing more than to go ‘get some air’ with him. She nodded and turned to tell ash she would be leaving for a moment, but Ash was already across the dance floor watching them with interest, like an omniscient being she was already ten steps ahead, cheering her on from a distance, she gave Emma a thumbs up in encouragement before returning to the masses. She was such a good friend.

She spun back to face the attractive stranger and he gripped her hand to help lead her out of the mosh pit and chaos of the crowd. Like he didn’t want to lose her. His hands were big, but not intimidating, he could fit her entire hand in his own easily, it was comforting in a way. Safe. His grip was strong, but at the same time his hand was still soft. It was surprising how comfortable she was with him. She was holding hands with a complete stranger, yet she felt

strangely at peace with him. Somewhere she felt as though she'd known this guy her whole life, which was crazy.

He led her through the throngs of college students and walked down a new hallway, one she'd never been through before, but that didn't surprise her; she hadn't spent much time in the building before. The further they got from the dance floor the temperature started to cool, the heat slowly receding and the sounds of music and people from the dancefloor was fading away as well, leaving her ears feeling fuzzy. She liked to call it the "cotton-ball effect," when after concerts and listening to DJs at school functions, she felt as if her ears were stuffed with cotton balls, she could still hear, but it all sounded so disconnected and far away. The sounds of their footsteps were muffled as he appeared to have reached his goal. At the end of the hallway was a pair of plain looking metal double doors. He pushed them open without hesitation to reveal a balcony that looked over the entire Burton College quad.

It took her breath away. She often forgot how lovely the Oregon septembers were. The air kissed her face and tickled her nose, it smelled of fall festivals, of pumpkins, and wet hay. It felt like nostalgia blanketed her. The quad was a large park-like area in the middle of campus, filled with all types of trees, pine, maple, aspen, to name a few. The colors of the leaves were starting to change, hinting at lovely orange and yellows, even a few reds as well. Even though it was night, the whole space was lit up with beautiful Edison bulbs that the student organizers for the party must have set up beforehand. It was stunning. She nearly forgot that she wasn't alone.

After she tore her gaze away from the spectacular view before her she looked to the guy on her right. But he was already facing her. In this soft yellow light she could make out more of his appearance. The rare strands of gold in his light brown hair sparkled and his height became even more apparent. His hair was messy, but in a way, it also looked like every piece was exactly where it was supposed to be.



“Thank you for helping me,” she broke the silence first, her voice sounded so clear in the new silence that accompanied them.

He shrugged, “right place, right time.”

“I have to ask,” he continued, his eyes twinkling mischievously, “why are you wearing PJs?”

He asked with a straight face, but she could tell he was hiding a shit-eating grin.

She gripped the chipped paint on the metal railing in front of her with her left hand and spun to face him, her free right hand went to her hip and she tilted her head, his eyes widened in anticipation as she replied, “Why *aren't* you?”

His face went so still before breaking out into the biggest smile. He started laughing again, he seemed to do that a lot, but she liked that about him. Every time she heard his laugh she wanted to hear it again. Anyone listening to that laugh would have been able to feel his authenticity. He wore his heart on his sleeve for anyone and everyone to see.

Once his laughing calmed he said, “That...” he took a breath, his lungs trying to catch up, “is such a good point. And here I was judging you when I should have been following your lead instead.” He shook his head, keeping his wide smile.

Emma smiled back, his joy was contagious, she felt so giddy around him, “such a conformist, tsk tsk,” she shook her head playfully at him. “That’s what I try to tell people, but for some reason they just don’t seem to believe me.”

He paused before leaning closer to her and whispered, while meeting her gaze, “their loss,” he spoke so softly, like he was sharing a secret, a secret only she could hear.

His voice did something to her, her stomach filled with raging butterflies, she was nervous, but also very excited. She wasn’t sure what had come over her, she had barely interacted with this guy and yet... and yet she was *very* attracted to him. She took a deep breath,

letting the cool Oregon fall air soothe her, allowing the glow of the string lights to ground her, she was on a precipice. She could feel the road in front of her diverging, and she was about to make a decision that would change everything, she could feel it in her soul, reverberating in her ribcage, and echoing around her heart.

“What’s your name?” she asked him.

This was the start, she could tell, the start of something huge.

He chuckled, “Cale, my name is Cale.”

Her smile grew, she didn’t know much about *Cale* but she had a pretty good feeling that she was going to learn.

## Chapter Two

### *Cale*

Out of all the infinite possibilities of how that night could have gone, getting to know a beautiful girl his age wouldn't have landed on his list of likely outcomes. Yet there he was, talking to a girl with frizzy blonde hair, wild like clouds, with a stunning smile and warm brown eyes. She looked almost as shocked as he was when he caught her on the dance floor. Almost.

It was strange. He honestly hadn't been paying much attention to his surroundings at all, he just happened to turn around right at that moment, the moment she started to fall. Things slowed down, the dancers faded away, and the music grew quiet as he just acted, arms reaching out, not even certain if he could actually catch her, he could have just as easily fallen with her. Thank god he didn't. That would have been embarrassing. He just reached and she landed, so softly, almost like she'd been in his arms the whole time.

He couldn't pinpoint, to this day, what had driven him to want to get to know her. In his entire life he had always avoided anything that had to do with girls and relationships, but after he helped her stand up, there was something in her surprised face, in her incredibly endearing sweatpants, that urged him to invite her out. He even went so far as to take her to his secret spot. There must have been something in the air that night, whether it be magic, fate, or coincidence. Something *other* guided him in those moments. And he would never stop being grateful for it. Never.

“What's your name?” she asked.

Her voice sounded like spring, of flowers and colors and life.

“Cale, my name is Cale,” he answered.

After answering, he waited the long established twenty seconds before she said the ever so predictable line—

“Like the vegetable?” she asked teasingly, finishing his thought for him.

Ah humanity, ever so consistent. People are always so unique until they are always the same. “Oh really?” he exclaimed with mock seriousness, “I never noticed!” His hand gripped his chest in faux shock.

She chuckled at his sarcasm, “Ha-ha, okay, I see, I get it.”

She paused, her brow creased in concentration, and he studied her. Her hair was his favorite thing about her, frizzy and lively, but her eyes had so much happiness hidden in their depth. Her skin was pale, so fair and smooth he almost worried even the smallest breeze would shatter her. She was stunning, even in her sweatpants, her *forest green* sweatpants. In a way, it meant she was brave, that she wasn't afraid of standing out in a crowd. She clearly wasn't looking for attention, but she wasn't scared of the attention either. It was admirable.

“What's your name?” He asked, thinking out loud.

She startled back to attention, shaken back from her thoughts, he wondered where she went when she was thinking so hard.

“Emma.” So smooth, again her bright voice lit up his ears.

“It's very nice to meet you Emma,” he responded, throwing in a theatrical bow, which earned him a giggle in return. An honest to goodness giggle. It felt as if he'd won something, something important, something that demanded to be protected, to be cherished. He would do anything to hear that sound over and over again.

“So, Cale,” she began meeting his eyes head on, leaving no room to hide, as if she held him to a higher standard, he fixed his posture under her scrutiny, “what do you do here at the *extremely prestigious* Burton College?”

“Well,” he started, “I don’t know what you have against this school, don’t think your sarcasm escaped my notice, and we *will* be circling back to that. My embarrassing story senses are tingling and I want— no need, to hear it.” That had earned him another soft laugh, another win for Cale Martin. “But to answer your question, I’m currently a junior bio major. I would like to go into medicine, but we’ll have to wait and see if that’s in the cards.”

He wanted to impress her, but being pre-med was probably the biggest thing in his life at the time, and yet it was so incredibly cliché. One could throw a rock on that campus, in any direction and hit an unsuspecting pre-med bio major.

“Oh!” He remembered, “I’m also an assistant for the men’s swim team, I help train all the guys and help the coaches with whatever they need.”

“So you’re kinda like a swimming TA?”

He nodded, “yeah pretty much.”

She hadn’t really reacted to his pre-med comment, but she seemed really curious about his swimming position.

“How’d you pull that off?” She asked, her tone challenging. It felt like a dare.

“Well I’m glad you asked, you see, in this world if you want a job that doesn’t exist yet you just need three things. First, a good point. Second, good looks,” she rolled her eyes at that one, “and third, a whole lot of ass kissing.”

“I think you need to elaborate,” she teased.

“It all began on a sunny Tuesday... Or was it a rainy Wednesday...”

“... and that’s why I make fun of the school’s qualifications now.” She finished her long and elaborate tale regarding her sarcastic comment earlier. He would never let that slide.

They were both laughing, gasping for air, not a care *in* the world or *of* the world. He really couldn’t explain it. How comfortable he felt around her. In all his years he only ever even

allowed himself one friend, so how did this one girl, that he met completely through happenstance, understand him so well? How was she the exception? In their brief conversation so far he'd dropped all his guards, all his walls, like he never even had any walls to begin with. He felt like he was a normal guy. Like maybe he could be a normal guy. She made him feel at ease. Happy even.

After calming down a little, Emma gathered all her hair into a simple bun on the back of her neck, so simply and smoothly it was almost like magic. Her eyes closed in concentration as she did so. He was captivated. Like a starving artist he felt the need to memorize all her features, her bushy Cara Delevigne eyebrows, her searching brown eyes that focused so closely on him whenever he spoke, it left him with no doubt that she was listening and studying his every word. It was intense, but welcome. He loved that she paid attention, it was rare to feel so heard these days. As per the theme of Emma Davis, he was beginning to realize, she was the exception, always the exception. Of course she was.

“So, what do you do at the *grand* Burton college, here in lovely Providence, Oregon?” He asked, adopting her sarcastic comment.

Her face grew serious as she appeared to consider her response, he appreciated the way she always gave thought to her answers. Making sure that she says what she wants to say. She's thoughtful and careful.

“Well, I'm also a junior, but I'm also still undeclared.”

That surprised him. From what he'd seen of her, he figured she'd have everything planned out already. Her whole future, every single delicate step, considered and decided.

“I know that's super weird,” she admits, “but I just can't seem to decide exactly what it is that I want to do. And selecting a major just feels so final. I suppose most people see choosing a major as diving into something exciting, which I agree with, but I can't help but feel like if I

choose one that I'd be closing so many other doors." She trailed off her voice quiet, laced with doubt and maybe embarrassment?

"I'm not sure if that made any sense at all, but that's what I'm doing here." She shrugged. The outgoing confident girl he met just minutes before shrinking away.

He wanted to say something to put her mind at ease, but before he could respond to perked up again, "But it's my mission to decide on one," her tone becoming more fierce with every syllable, "it's not like I'm not interested in anything, I'm just interested in *everything*. Which in my opinion is a good problem to have."

The girl across from him had done a complete 180 in a matter of seconds, shifting from utterly hopeless to almost leading her own pep talk. It was spectacular to observe. It also made him appreciate her even more.

"I can't imagine that," he said, "I've always known that I wanted to work in medicine and help people. Maybe I should have given it more thought like you..."

Before he could finish his thought, Emma jumped in, "No, it's a good thing that you know what you wanted to do! My dads are the same, they both figured out what they wanted before they left grade school. I'm so jealous."

"Did you know," Cale began, "that the average person changes careers seven times in their lifetime?"

She shook her head.

"You know what that means? Even if you pick something now, you could still change your mind. It might not all be as weighted as you think it is. It's not set in stone. The decisions you make now doesn't mean you can't change your mind again in the future."

*Where did that come from?*

He thought on his words a little more, “perhaps that’s not as helpful as I hoped, it’s kinda scary in it’s own way.” He chuckled.

She laughed with him, her eyes softening, “I’m going to say it was helpful. In a way that really opened my eyes. Thank you.”

A warm feeling spread through his body, from his fingers to his feet. Pride. He had been helpful. Her thank you left him feeling like he might fly. Immediately he wanted to help her again, and again, and again. Wanted to see her smile again, and again, and again. Hear all her thoughts again, and again, and again.

“Hey—” he stopped, cut off by the doors that came from suddenly being thrown open.

When he turned to see who the intruders were he noticed that they were just two very drunk college students trying and failing to makeout with one another.

In the time they’d both been talking, he honestly forgot about the party inside, to him it was only the two of them. No one else. Until the loud party goers interrupted them.

“Oh my god” Emma’s voice rang across his ears. He spun to face her, she was now desperately looking at her phone, “I can’t believe its been two hours. I need to call my friend, one moment.” She was already across the balcony before he could even nod.

*Two hours?*

How had two hours gone by so quickly? He couldn’t believe it.

Emma was talking with her friend on the phone, probably the same friend that had given her a thumbs up earlier, *yeah he noticed that*. Man, time had flown so fast. Then it hit him.

He wanted to see her again.

*He* wanted to see a *girl* again.

Cale decided at that moment that when she came back, he would ask for her number, or her social media handles, anything, so that he could see her again, talk with her again. He was



certain. There was nothing tangible he could point to, but there was a feeling, some sensation beating with his heart, telling him— no commanding him— to keep her around. His own feelings shocked him. As he stood up he began rehearsing in his mind exactly how he would ask her for her number when a hand grabbed his shoulder from behind.

Startled, he spun to face the owner of the firm grip. He was surprised to see a familiar face. Max. Max was his best friend. They both grew up in the small town of Providence, but they hadn't grown close until highschool. For a long time Cale denied himself human connection, still was oftentimes, but Max weaseled himself into his life. Even though he had started down the wrong path and fallen in with a bad crowd, Max never gave up on him. It was almost funny. The two of them made such a strange pair. Max was a theoretical physics major, small and gangly, and had the glasses to match. Meanwhile Cale was a biology major. Max was the brains, and Cale was the people person. Both of them were technically STEM, but they were also very different sides of STEM. Despite those differences though, they remained close.

“What's up?” Cale asked.

Max just gave him a teasing look, “Who was that?” pointing in the direction Emma was standing behind him on her phone.

He pushed his friend's hand off his shoulder, this wasn't a joking matter, “Emma.” Then he paused, hesitating because he was unsure about how much he wanted to share. A small superstitious part of him felt like if he shared too much then he might jinx them, whatever *they* were, into nonexistence. But then decided against his concerns, “I think I want to see her again.”

His voice came out softer than he had meant it to.

Max's jaw went slack, his face losing it's teasing demeanor, “are you serious?”

He was about to speak up, but the words got caught in his throat so he simply nodded.

Max gave him a strong side eye, like he was considering everything that he had just admitted out loud. Cale couldn't blame him, he was shocked himself.

“What was it about her that convinced you?”

Cale was taken aback by the sudden question, he was asking himself the same thing all night. “Well, she just fell into my arms, and while I was just being nice at first, I felt different when I was talking to her, she was different. I think I want to try getting to know her more.” His cheeks flushed, embarrassed.

So he kept talking, trying to take on a more jovial tone, “which I know goes against my usual ‘no-dating’ rule. But maybe, maybe I’m ready to make an exception.”

His friend grew serious, but there was something else there, was it pride? Like he was proud of him, “You’re serious about this girl, aren’t you?” Max shook his head slowly like he was in disbelief, “who are you and what have you done to my best friend Cale Martin?”

He couldn't help but smile at his friend, “I’m not saying that this will go anywhere, but I am open to trying something. I think I’m ready.”

Just when it looked like Max was about to say something else, his gaze lifted over Cale's shoulder and then his face shifted to something akin to panic, “Uh oh...”

“What?” He asked, quickly glancing behind him to see what was wrong.

It didn't take him long to figure it out. Emma was gone.

## Chapter Three

### *Emma*

When her phone glowed up at her with the angry time: 12:04 a.m. She knew that she had messed up.

*Two hours!*

*Two long hours?!*

It was insane, impossible, that she, *Emma Davis*, would lose track of time like that. But yet there she was, talking with a boy for two hours, and feeling like she would do it all over again. He was so kind, funny, and sweet. Not to mention completely handsome.

While she had felt bad for leaving him alone like that, she needed to call her friend. Ash picked up immediately.

“Emma, where are you?”

A wince broke across her face, and right when she was about to apologize Ash continued on. Mom mode activated.

“You know, I never thought in a million years, that *I* would be the one searching for *you* at the end of a party. You can never assume these things I guess... You are a fast learner my friend, one fast learner...”

When a brief pause appeared she tried to take the opportunity to say her piece again, but to no avail, because Ash was not done.

“But seriously, do you know how long I’ve been searching for you?” The guilt she was already feeling multiplied ten-fold, she felt completely horrible. She placed a hand on her forehead in concentration.

“Ash” she launched herself into the conversation, “I’m so so so unbelievably sorry. I know it sounds silly, but I completely lost track of time. I just checked my phone and saw the time. I really am so sorry.”

Ash seemed unconvinced, “hmm,” she whined on the other side of the call, Emma had a feeling she was just pretending to be upset, but she couldn’t be too certain. Just when the silence was becoming too much for her to handle, her friend’s voice came back, “Oh Emma, I can’t pretend to be upset anymore, you are completely forgiven, but only under the conditions that you tell me absolutely everything about the gorgeous mystery man.”

A wave of relief washed through her at her best friend’s words, “deal, where are you?”

“I’m still at the student union building, want to meet out front and drive back to your place?”

“Sounds like a plan, I’ll see you soon.”

“Kk!” Ash hung up the phone with a swift click.

The last few hours with Cale had been amazing. She enjoyed every second, every word, and every laugh shared between them. Like it was magic. But when she looked at her phone and saw the time, she felt reality dawn on her again. The curtains of her fairytale closed tightly shut, a one time occurrence. After her phone call with Ash ended, she looked over to Cale. He was still breathtakingly stunning, unfair really. But he was talking with a friend. They seemed to be having a good conversation, lost in it. Maybe he forgot she was still there. Maybe the time they had just spent together didn’t matter to him that much at all.

She mentally slapped herself. How could she be so stupid? Of course it didn't matter to him. In those hours she allowed herself to get swept up on her own idealistic romanticism. That he must have felt the same connection that she did. But that wasn’t necessarily the case, was it? Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Not everyone was as naive as she was. She had little to no experience with boys and relationships. It would be dumb to assume the same would go for him. For all she knew he met with strange girls all the time. She could just be another nameless faceless girl in a long list of other nameless faceless girls. Ugh.

So stupid. How did she let herself get so attached in so little time? It was only going to leave her hurt and disappointed. Better to leave things as they were. A fun night with a person she would never see again. Safer. Smarter. More responsible.

With her decision made, she quickly left the balcony, leaving Cale and whatever could have been behind her. She didn't allow herself to look back, she needed to leave with her head held high and facing forward.

She wouldn't give in to the storm brewing in the back of mind, screaming that she was making a mistake. This was the right choice.

It was the smart choice.

## Chapter Four

### *Cale*

The paper crinkled beneath his legs as he waited in the exam room for his cardiologist. The nurse had just been in to take his temperature, blood pressure, and weight. So he was left alone. Well, alone with his thoughts, his least favorite activity. Everything that surrounded him became a washed out yellow color due to the excessive neon lights and off white walls and very loud white paper sheets blanketed the space. The familiar antiseptic smell was crushing, itching his nose sending goosebumps up his arms and a perpetual chill down his spine.

Yes, he wanted to be a doctor. But not because he enjoyed the particular environment he found himself in. No, he wanted to be a doctor because he craved the future of making things better. A little bit, at least.

The last time he had discussed his future was when he met Emma. It had been two weeks since that fateful night. Two weeks, and he still knew her name, still remembered the warmth of her eyes, and still regretted not being able to find her after she disappeared. So odd. Reason demanded that he move on, forget about her, it's not like he knew much information about her to forget about in the first place. Despite his attempts to listen to reason though, his mind constantly betrayed her, wandering to her frizzy hair, her adorable laugh, and falling down a rabbit hole of his own messy thoughts and panic. *What was she doing? What was she thinking? Who was she talking to?* And why wasn't it him?

To be completely honest, he did believe in fate and destiny. Not like in a weird way. But just enough that he couldn't help but think that maybe they were supposed to be *something*. She fell into his arms completely by chance, but then they also stuck around each other, talking and laughing by choice. It could have been fate telling him something.

If his roommate or the guys on the swim team heard his thoughts on fate and destiny he would never hear the end of it. But of course would it still be fate if at the end of the night she left without saying goodbye? Perhaps not. So he needed to move on, accept she was the one who got away. Move on.

But nope. He never moved on.

Like some masochistic maniac.

His heart twinged with regret.

Before he could lose himself more to the regretful chaos stirring around inside him the door to the hallway outside his room opened. Tearing him back to reality, quickly and without pause.

Entering the extremely small, extremely depressing, exam room was his cardiologist. He was an older man, balding with just enough hair left to do this god-awful-comb-over-thing, and he was calm and quiet, had been since Cale was a young boy and they'd met for the first time.

He was six years old and terrified of the overwhelming grandeur of everything that surrounded him in the giant hospital, every doctor was a looming presence and the furniture was too big for him to approach on his own. It was all too large, too much. It made him want to shrink down and disappear. At the time he was able to hide behind his mom, but even hiding behind his mom couldn't shield him from the truth.

“Congenital heart disease.”

The first time he heard those words shook him to his core. As a child he didn't know the first thing about what any of it meant, but he didn't need to. Each syllable was defined, hard, intense, and laced with layers of terror. All the color left the space, becoming a monochrome prison of truth and ending. For some reason the smell stuck with him, the scent of shots and flu season, the scent of heartbreak and loss and of mourning. The moment those words left the

doctor's mouth, his mom audibly gasped. It felt so loud, probably why it was so ingrained into his soul and memory. When he peered up to her face all he saw were her tears, blending in with the yellow lights above them, they fell but didn't look real. It was silent. They were all silent. Or rather, Cale stopped hearing everything else.

*Mom please don't cry, what's happening?*

Kids like to pretend that their parents are infallible, undefeatable, and unbreakable. But it was at that moment that he saw his mom shatter. He didn't understand why she was so broken, but he recognized the pain that flitted across her face. The day his mom cried for him, he got a first hand account that adults are scared too. Cale never forgot.

Congenital heart disease.

Still drained of all color, his mom asked, "how long?"

He didn't know it then, but he realized years later that she had been asking when he would die.

"Cale, welcome back!" Dr. Wood greeted him back to the present, "it's been a bit since I've seen you last. How have you been?"

Dr. Wood was his cardiologist ever since that first day. They had regular appointments every month for the previous fifteen years. He was practically family at that point.

"Oh great! I'm running a marathon next week," he answered, giving his doctor a playful look.

The man chuckled, "you never change Cale, I like that about you, always a sense of humor."

He smiled and shifted on his skinny basic exam room bed, filling the room with an uncomfortably loud cacophony of crinkling. Time changed his perspective; he ran his hand along the cool fake leather edge playing with the tissue paper, the same material that surrounded



presents and gifts. What had once appeared to him as a sky-scraper-like monster when he was a child, was now smaller, less terrifying. If anything he could almost say that what used to be a monster evolved to become his anchor of safety. Always there, always grounding him.

“So what’s the plan doc?” he flashed a winning smile.

He always asked, maybe out of tradition or ritual, but it was always the same every time. After going to the same place every month for over a decade he started to pick up on a pattern.

Dr. Wood cleared his throat, “we’ll run the usual tests, make sure nothing’s changed,” he paused, his face and tone grew more melancholy, “we all know the overall situation hasn’t changed, but we want to ensure that the time table hasn’t moved up.”

Ah yes, the *time table*.

He nodded, doing his best to remain nonchalant about everything, or as much as he possibly could, even as his thoughts screamed.

After the plethora of tests, Cale once again waited in his assigned spot, staying true to his role as dutiful patient. He allowed his legs to dangle over the side, swirling. They moved like they were treading water, one leg, then the other leg, one leg, then the other. His own brand of death march. He kicked and kicked, desperately trying to remain afloat, trying not to think too much.

When Dr. Wood entered again, the atmosphere changed. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but something shifted.

This was where Dr. Wood would normally come back talking about how ‘nothing’s changed,’ and how ‘he’s still on the transplant list,’ but in the meantime ‘Cale needs to be careful’ and ‘swing by if anything feels off.’

But something in the air told Cale that Dr. Wood would be going off script.

This was it, the moment everything would be revealed. He hoped for the best, knowing the best still wasn't that great, at most his heart would still be imploding. But still was the magic word. The end would still be far off, he would still have time. Still still still. It would all be a concern, but a concern he could put off in his head. A concern to forget about for as long as possible.

Cale lived in a constant state of denial.

He squirmed again under Dr. Wood's gaze. There was a hesitation on the part of the doctor. Never a good sign. Dr. Wood nervously cleared his throat, the small cough thundered across the silent space. An omen.

"Cale," why did he say his name so softly, adrenaline started pumping through his body and his weak heart, *tread tread tread*, "we all knew that this day would come, so it's no surprise, but the time table has shifted up."

He never noticed how loud the buzzing of the neon lights were, they were very demanding, beckoning him, calling his attention far far away.

*Tread.*

"ale... Cale" Dr. Wood called out.

Cale shook his head, like he was trying to wake himself up. But nope. He was already awake. He stared at the doctor, choosing to study the silvery watch on his wrist rather than the man himself. His eyes trailed to his coat pocket, the crisp scratchy linen filled with pens. Does he actually use all those pens? Probably not. His tie was straight, but it had a small stain towards the bottom, it looked like an old stain, it's a shame that the doctor still hasn't noticed. How many times had he worn that same tie, stain and all, without noticing? So many thoughts. Thoughts trying to flood out the other thoughts. Keep them at bay.

He refused to look into the doctor's eyes where he would find sympathy, or worse pity.

No, he refused.

*No, no, no, no, no.*

“Cale you need to hear this, even if it's difficult, I need you to understand,” the doctor's voice firm, but there was a hint of doubt, of worry. That small piece of pity and fear was exactly what he wanted to avoid.

If his doctor was upset, where did that leave him?

Nowhere good.

Nowhere at all.

“I'm listening,” his voice answered for him, sounding robotic and reflexive. Like an out of body experience, he observed and listened to himself and his doctor from some distant spot, detached from it all. He kept waiting to feel all his nerves, all his pent up panic, the adrenaline, but it never came. Everything felt cold. All sensation was fading away, leaving him unfeeling. The numbness crawled around his limbs, taking him over, possessing any shred of sensation he had left. He froze. Until nothing was left.

To defrost would be to burn.

Better to remain.

A sigh from Dr. Wood shook his mind, stealing his attention, “Cale, based on the results of the tests that we just ran,” he paused. Why was he stalling? He wanted Dr. Wood to spit it out. He wanted Dr. Wood to never finish that thought. He wanted to know. He didn't want to know anything.

“It would appear you have two years left.”

Oh.

As soon as the soft 't' sound left the doctor's quietly trembling lips all sound ceased to exist in that small room. The silence grew from that last syllable, splintering and expanding like a contagion. Filling the space, and weighing on all their shoulders. *Two years. Two years. Two years.* He had never felt so tiny, so utterly insignificant.

Huh.

What can one even do in two years? Get an associate's degree? Travel to *part* of the world? Two years was nothing. ~~He was nothing.~~ Two years goes by in the blink of an eye, what was he even doing two years ago? Something pointless, something that didn't impact him. Smothered in the blanket of silence he thought and thought and thought. Spinning in clock-like circles. He was lost in his mind. ~~He was losing his mind.~~ What would he do with the time he had left?

"What this means," Dr. Wood continued, "is that if you don't receive a transplant within two years, it's very unlikely that you could survive much longer. Your name has been moved up on the donor list considering this new information, which is good. You still have an excellent chance, you just need to stay positive..."

Stay positive? That was never Cale's strong suit.

Yes he made jokes, yes he laughed, and yes he smiled.

But positivity? Optimism? Not his forte.

With the mindset of a criminal on death row, with nothing to lose. He had made plenty of mistakes.

When he was a freshman in highschool, struggling to find his place like everyone else, he fell into a bad crowd, not a gang, but a group of young kids who had too much time on their hands and absolutely no understanding of the concept of consequences. Cale in particular because what did he have to lose? The others, he had no idea. He never asked. They were a

group but it wasn't like they ever talked. It was just a collective for a handful of dangerously reckless kids to commit petty crimes and wallow in their shitty lives together. It was a group of kids who hated the world.

Eventually the group wanted to branch out from their usual shenanigans of staying out after the city curfew and vandalizing street signs and rob a local liquor store. It was one of two liquor stores in the tiny town of Providence, the perfect target for the lawless irresponsible squad. He didn't really *want* to go, but what else was he going to do? *What did he have to lose?*

He grabbed his dingy bike from the garage and headed over to meet the boys who had decided to go.

He was barely five minutes into his journey and two blocks away from his destination when his bike lurched on a rock and the front tire on his bike popped. He swerved trying to maintain control of the thing, eventually he awkwardly landed on the sidewalk. The bike sat abandoned and broken to the side of him. While he considered for a moment walking the rest of the way to meet them at the spot, he decided against it. It wasn't worth it.

So he sat on the sidewalk. The brutal chill of the cement soaked through to the skin of his legs, filling his veins with ice, but he didn't care. So he just stayed. It could have been minutes or hours, he couldn't tell. Time ceased to exist for a moment, it left him alone with the stars and the pavement. Together they remained. His breath bleeding from his mouth, made visible by the bite in the air. Like a dragon his mouth steamed. His very own dragon breath.

He was curious about whether or not the rest of the boys went through with their robbery, they definitely didn't care if he was there or not, none of them cared if any of them were there or not. The universe decided to give him an answer in the form of a line of police cars driving in his direction, coming from the liquor store.

The cars were moving fast, but he knew what he saw. In the back seats of the cars that passed him, were the kids that he was going to join. If not for the broken bicycle. He would have been one of those kids. Huddled in the back of a car. Caught. Trapped.

It gave him pause.

That was almost him.

He had been so focused on the fact that he had a shell of a life, that he nearly got himself arrested.

Looking back, he was on the verge of healing and epiphany. He was so close. But he took it too far. He came to the conclusion that he needed to be better than the way he was acting out. He didn't want to spend his life in jail or feeling empty all the time.

So he shoved all his fears, all his worries, all his existentialism into a deep dark corner. Out of sight. Out of mind. He needed it to disappear. He needed to feel better. So he made all his negative thoughts disappear.

Cale peered back up at his doctor who was still talking, “---transplant is still likely and could occur at any moment.”

He tried to absorb these words, but he had already taken in everything that he could. No matter how much he wanted to be a positive person, he never has been. He desperately wanted to be lighthearted and happy, to be someone who could lift up others when they needed it, not be an anchor that drags them down with him.

The dark corner of his mind where he hides all the darkness and doubt was shaking, it wanted to be released, it wanted out. But he couldn't allow that. He needed a brave smile, a good joke, not *that*. So he did what he always did, and pushed the arising dark feelings he had away, no matter how difficult, no matter how much they wanted escape, he pushed and pushed and pushed. Where they wouldn't affect anybody. ~~Where they wouldn't affect him.~~

He recognized that he needed to speak up. Dr. Wood needed him to show that he understood what was going on.

He cleared his throat, “why do I only have---” but his voice cracked without his permission. *Keep it together*, “why do I suddenly only have two years?”

“Well we can’t know exactly why, it could be any number of reasons, but we always expected this moment would come. Your heart just isn’t ready to take care of the body of a grown man. It’s weak and poorly developed.” The doctor visibly paled, maybe he was worried that he came off too cold and serious, but Cale appreciated the bluntness, facades of worry and pity scare him so much more. Serious provided a layer of distance. Distance he desperately needed.

The older man quickly added, “But really though, the likelihood of receiving a transplant before that time is still very high, so don’t lose faith.”

*Can’t lose what you never had.*

A smile quickly plastered itself onto his face, “don’t worry doc, you don’t have to tread so carefully around me, like you said we all knew this point was coming.”

The doctor gave him a sad smile, “I understand needing to laugh right now, I really do.” He took a breath, “but it’s okay to be sad too. Please don’t be afraid to confide in and talk with people.”

It felt like he had just seen into the deepest recesses of his mind. His eyes started to fill with tears, unwanted, uninvited tears. So he just nodded firmly at Dr. Wood.

Vision blurry, he tilted his head back down to look at his feet. He scrutinized every single detail. He wore white sneakers, now more yellow with grime and abuse, they had once been completely spotless, but the earth quickly stole that away. Marking the perfect soles forever, taking piece and piece.

Eventually his breathing slowed.

His hand gripped the bench on either side of him, his knuckles were turning white with tension, carrying the weight of all his worries.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Hide it.

Hide it all.

His grip loosened, gradually, so that he could let go.



## Chapter Five

### *Emma*

The wrinkled flyer in her hand, barely readable through the countless creases and folds from her stress tearing, scratching, and folding, once described a Major Fair for “curious and open minded students.” Which was really code for “lost and confused students.”

She wasn't trying to keep her undeclared-ness a secret, but that didn't change the fact that it was embarrassing. As a junior, it was expected of her to know her path, or at least *a* path that she could take. But nope. She had nothing, came up with nothing. Her empty hands just reflected her own frustration two fold. So while she absolutely despised the overly-cheery pamphlet in her hand, she listened to its suggestions anyway. The major fair was a good place for her to find the answers that she was desperate for.

After all, what could she lose? She already had absolutely no idea what she was doing, worst case scenario she'd just be right back where she started. Did that really put her at ease? Not particularly, but she still tried to convince herself that it did.

In front of her stood the out of date metal double doors, the gatekeepers to the union. She hadn't faced them since she last visited the student union for the semester party. The party she attended with Ash. The party where she met Cale. Cale.

In the moment she decided that she misread the situation. That there was absolutely no way that a gorgeous, smart, funny, fantastic guy like Cale would ever seriously be interested in a recluse like her. But as the days passed since she so cruelly left him without a goodbye on the secret patio she started to doubt her rash conclusion. Maybe, maybe he was actually enjoying the conversation as much as she did. Maybe, maybe he wanted to get to know her too.

Maybe, maybe, maybe, maybe.

This was the pattern. Once she gave into her temptation to think about Cale, her mind was stormed with a tsunami of maybes and what-ifs. But she couldn't allow herself to get too lost in those thoughts, because they only led to one destination.

Regret.

Was leaving him a mistake? Oh god she hoped not.

But the way her mind kept returning to the same place, *him*, she had an inkling that perhaps it was.

AHHHHHH

She couldn't think about him. As a strong, independent woman, she didn't need a man. And she had bigger problems at stake. Like her future.

Thinking about him could just be her mind's way of distracting her from the bigger issue at hand, yeah, she was just tricking herself. Distracting herself.

Those feelings of regret were nothing more than an illusion to place distance between herself and her actual problems.

Yeah. That was it.

Yeah.

Yeah...

With a deep breath she squared her shoulders, straightened her back, and set her gaze to the metal doors still staring her down.

She had a mission.

She wouldn't fail this time.

When she started school, a younger, rosy cheeked freshman, being undeclared was cute, it was accepted, in fact, it was appreciated.

*Oh that's good, you're thinking things through.*

*Wow you have so many different opportunities, that's so exciting!*

*You'll find something so exciting, I know it.*

And again and again and again.

But come the end of sophomore year and the tones of people started to shift. It was no longer "good" or "exciting." It was unfortunate.

*Oh, well I'm sure you'll find something.*

*Wait but you only have two years left?*

*But what do you actually want to do?*

*Aren't you kinda wasting your time?*

Not that she could feel hurt by their judgments. She was already thinking the same exact things. But what did she "actually want to do?" And she could definitely feel the clock ticking. If she didn't want to end up some crazy super senior in her seventh year as an undergraduate, which was an extremely dramatic way of putting it, then she needed to choose something.

Anything.

This semester was her moment.

She could feel it.

Soon when someone asked her what her major was, she'd have an answer.

She will have an answer.

She will find her path.

At least that's what she told herself over and over and over again.

So she took those first few steps and closed the distance between herself and the malicious reflective doors. She met her own eyes, she gave her copy a nod before gripping the handles. And pulled.

But the doors didn't budge.

She tried one more time pulling the door with all her might until a figure appeared from the door next to her.

“Um its push,” they explained.

Red flushed her cheeks in embarrassment.

Not the best start.

She pushed.

“So how was the major fair?” Ash asked excitedly.

Ash decided to meet in her apartment to discuss how her journey through all the cheerful people and over powering banners went. She felt better now that she was back in her own space. But she was still disappointed.

“Not great,” she lamented.

They sat together on the floor of her living room, drinking hot chocolate which rested on the coffee table between them.

Ash’s eyes widened, “Really? Not a single table stood out to you?”

All she could do was shake her head, “not a single one.”

She was so envious. Ash was another person who just knew what she wanted to do. Her friend loved the environment and wanted to be a lobbyist up in Washington to promote more environmental protection laws so she decided to major in environmental science and ecology so she could someday join a group as an expert in the field.

Emma would have given her left foot to have that kind of clarity.

“Maybe we should go to a palm reader,” Ash suggested jokingly before taking a sip of her hot chocolate.

A palm reader? Honestly, she was kind of desperate. Maybe it wouldn’t be that bad of an idea.

“Wait, are you actually considering that? I was half joking.”

“Which means you were half serious,” she pointed out.

Five minutes later the pair found themselves in Ash’s car, a used hybrid, and had maps guiding them to the nearest palm reader they could find. Which wasn’t that far at all. The car played quiet music as the world spun by them. It might be crazy to seek out a psychic, but if it helped her then it would all be worth it. And Ash was gonna be with her the whole time. The seat beneath her absorbed her worries, stresses, as she smoothly sunk into the soft fabric. She would eventually find her path and she would use all tools at her disposal. And if a palm reader was one of them then she would utilize it.

Eventually they turned off the road heading towards the parking lot for the shops around the palm readers store.

“Okay,” Ash started as she parked, “you sure you want to do this?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Alright let's do this.”

Slowly she stepped out of the car, her sneakers scraping against the poorly maintained pavement. The sun was beginning to set on the horizon, painting the sky pink, dusted with blue tinted clouds. Her body was prepped, awaiting the nerves and adrenaline that she anticipated, but instead she was calm. Certain almost.

Ash led the way, and she followed her friend’s sure footed pacing.

Once they got to the main road, the psychic’s shop was right there. Not that it was easy to miss. Amongst the other simple stores on the quiet road, it had bright colors and a giant hand board outside above the door claiming that there was a psychic inside. The only piece of normalcy was a simple neon open sign, which was blinking welcomingly.

Ash stopped by the door, waiting for her permission to open the door. So she just reached for the door herself.

“Let’s do this,” she announced, whether that was to her friend or to herself she was unsure. But she pushed the door in.

A light purring of a bell announced their arrival.

The only experience Emma had with psychics were what she had seen in movies and TV shows, so to be frank, she was expecting something dark and foreboding, with skulls and dark crystals. She didn’t expect what she saw.

Everything was light.

There was a small water feature in the corner, behind the front desk which stood unattended. A faint and rhythmic splashing filled the air from the splashing of the waterfall as the pooled water fell upon the rocks below the fall. There were candles, but nothing scary, just calm lavender scented candles that tickled her nose and put her at ease. The space was relaxing.

When she spun to get a look at her friend she could tell that Ash was having the same unexpected realization that she was having.

That this would be nothing like the movies.

“One moment, I’ll be right with you,” a soft voice called out from the back room.

“No worries!” She attempted to assuage the worker.

A few heartbeats later a tall and lean woman emerged, pulling the doorway beads to the side. Her face was all angles, but she had warm eyes. It wasn’t because of any particular feature, but she was kind.

The woman walked behind the front desk and asked, “what can I help you both with?”

There was an awkward moment where Emma nearly forgot why she was there, but it was quickly remedied, “I was wondering if I could get my palm read?”

The lady across from her smirked, “well you came to the right place. Come into the back with me.”

Together they all made their way towards a room in the back. Through the beaded doors, and down a bright hallway. The space felt almost clinical.

When they reached the assigned door the woman gestured for them to head inside.

The room was small, but darker than the rest of the store had been. It was a tight square room, with dark purple walls. At the center of the room rested an intimate table with two chairs on one side and one on the other. Emma figured that the side with two seats was meant for them. So she nervously took a seat.

She couldn't believe that she was actually a palm reader. She mainly was here because of her struggle to choose a major, but deep down she knew that she also had questions about Cale. While she tried to push him down, he kept reappearing. Over and over and over again, he would take over her mind, her thoughts, and her actions.

Maybe the psychic could tell her how to get over this man.

The palm reader took a seat across from them once she closed the door.

“So why are you here today?”

Here it was, the moment she would need to say her questions out loud. But why was that so much harder than she thought it would be? A lump formed in her throat, blocking her speech, preventing her from sharing.

She was scared.

She didn't want to admit anything to a stranger.

Hell, she didn't even want to admit her issues to herself.

“I'm– I'm feeling– lost...” she managed to get out.

The woman nodded, like this was exactly what she had expected. Ash just sat silently, observing everything, she seemed like she almost wanted to be invisible, unnoticed,

“I know that you said that you wanted to get your palm read, but I also do Tarot, and the deck is calling to me right now. Would you rather do a card reading? Or stick with the palm reading?”

If the cards were telling her to do a card reading, who was she to say no?

“Sure, a card reading would be fine.”

“Perfect.”

She lightly shuffled the tarot deck, the cards were larger, and bent perfectly to the psychic's will. They danced along the table, spinning and shaking. The cards were beautiful. Before Emma had a moment to pause, they were perfectly fanned out in front of her.

“Now, choose three cards, point to them and I will collect them for you. Don't overthink it, just grab the cards that pull you.”

*The cards that pull you*

How does one know when they are being pulled??

She reached out her right hand, and started to hover it over the fanned deck, until she felt it. A distinct feeling of calling, of being chosen. She dropped and pointed, “that one.” She then repeated that process two more times.

When she finished selecting her cards, she found herself to be out of breath. It had taken a lot out of her.

“Alright, let's see what we got here.” She flipped all the cards down on the table. The first was an upside down woman.



“Your first card is a reversed High Priestess. This means that you are repressing your feelings, and not trusting yourself with something. It symbolizes a silence, one that is self-inflicted. Simply, you do not trust yourself.”

It was scary how accurate the card was. She didn't trust herself, not to make a choice with her future and not with love either. If she made a decision, then she would be responsible for that decision, especially if it was a failure.

“Your second card is the lovers. This card obviously means love, finding love, but it also means harmony, and balance. It can also mean that you have some major life changing decisions ahead of you.”

Harmony? Balance? One thing was for sure, she did have some major life decisions ahead of her.

“And your last card is the hermit. This card often shows that the person in question is often a guiding light for others, a helper, and a sharer of wisdom. That you both receive guidance and give it to others. It also symbolizes soul searching and personal growth.”

Why were all of these so accurate?

“That's what the cards wanted to share, do you have any questions for me?”

Any questions? Uh, all of them?

“So what should I do now?” She asked quietly.

The psychic smiled kindly, “Well, the cards are exact answers, but what I'm seeing is that you need to trust yourself to make these major decisions in life. You have the knowledge and wisdom to do so. Give yourself permission to succeed.”

**An·ger** /'eŋgə/

---

1: an intense emotion that is uncomfortable

2: a feeling that often leads to violence or aggression

3: a loud emotion that usually clouds the deeper emotions that one is trying to avoid

## Chapter Six

### *Cale*

Cale woke up because of a tickling sensation on the corner of his mouth. He tried to escape its annoying reach, but to no avail. Whatever was causing the tickling was desperately clinging to his face despite all his efforts. Eventually he gave in, admitted defeat, and opened his eyes.

He would not fall back asleep that morning.

With his eyes now open he was able to see, or rather, noticed his lack of vision. There was something on his face that was also blocking his sight. A sigh escaped from his lips as he released the yellow note from his forehead. His eyes closed for just a brief moment as he allowed himself to grieve for the sleep he was having and how that sleep was so hurtfully taken from him. Once he'd grieved enough, he finally resigned himself to his conscious presence in the world.

The lofted twin xl bed of his dorm creaked under his weight as he shifted up to get a good look at the note that had stolen his good sleep from him. In a messy sharpie scrawl was the message:

`Finished the last of our coffee, see you tonight! -Max'

Great. Not only did he lose his sleep because of this blasphemous sticky note, but he was also not going to get coffee.

Great.

Awkwardly, his legs flailed down from the bed. The dorm room wasn't awful, but it was small, and with Cale's height, it made getting down from his lofted bed only more painful. But was he ever going to unloft his bed? No no he wouldn't.

Once he'd landed safely, with not one, but both his feet on the ground, he headed to grab some clothes. He would need to go outside this morning to find some caffeine.

As he was putting on a plain shirt and some black pants he found his gaze wandering around his shared dorm with Max. Nothing had changed, but it hit him again how simple his half of the room was, while Max's side had a character about it. He had a Newton's cradle and a few physics posters that honestly made no sense to Cale. Meanwhile, all he had were empty walls and blue bedding.

He lived like he was a ghost.

Like he was a visitor in his own life.

With a clean shirt and pants, he was surely making his way closer to coffee. With a quick brush of his teeth he would be ready to stain them with the dark black stain from his favorite blend at his favorite coffee shop. Lucky for him, this was one of his few days off. He already finished all of his homework and he was off from all his volunteering locations. He supposed he could have been studying a little, but he deserved a break.

So he would be going off-campus for a little adventure.

He loved living on a small campus, however it had its drawbacks. Nothing was open on the weekends, which meant if he needed anything he would need to leave. But the town of Providence was perfect for walking. It was small but youthful, since it was a college town, and the nature was spectacular, just far enough away from the Oregon coast to actually get winter, but not so far that it didn't get the fresh ocean air. Providence was a little paradise. And it also happened to be home to his favorite coffee.

With one last glimpse at himself, in his lackluster dorm mirror, he was off. The hallway outside his room was also eerily quiet. It surprised him, since he lived in a large athletics dorm building. Since he was like an assistant-assistant coach to the men's swim team, he was offered a

place to stay with the rest of them. Something he greatly appreciated, but it also meant one bathroom shared with half the floor, and half a floor made up of stinky student athletes. Fifteen people shared three sinks and four showers. But he was lucky. He didn't ever want to forget how amazing it was that he was offered such an opportunity.

While he was growing up he always wanted to be a part of a team, or a sport, but his heart was never strong enough. But with the support of good directors and programs he was still able to find a place for himself behind the scenes. He would gladly do communal living for that opportunity.

He quickly mussed his hair, and tossed his keys around his finger, as he finally stepped outside. The air was cool, but refreshing. Fall was here and it made the moisture in the air feel even colder. With a renewed vigor from the fresh air, he began his journey to his usual coffee shop, *Brewsing for a Beating*. It was one of the few local shops in the area, but he chose that shop because he respects a good pun, and a pun idiom combo had no contest. Thus *Brewsing for a Beating* became his study and work spot. Whenever he needed to get out of the dorm to get things done, if he ever needed a change of pace, his coffee shop was always there for him. He does admit that he was on the fence about their actual coffee at first, he had eventually grown a scary but healthy dependency on the stuff.

As Cale strolled across campus he listened to the music of the wind blowing through the leaves in the large trees that surrounded him. The air was cool but just humid enough with the early morning mist that he could almost smell the ocean that was about ninety miles to west. Cale's favorite time of year was definitely summer, but autumn was a close second. The air just felt so good. The campus was empty, like a ghost town, but he didn't mind, in fact he rather enjoyed having his little world to himself. The whole world was his own.

Cale started to notice more people buzzing around as he got closer to downtown. The world was still far from busy, but it was also no longer his own. His favorite coffee shop was only two blocks away from campus, in the middle of one of the most popular intersections of downtown. It's important to remember though, 'popular' in providence didn't really mean much.

He always loved downtown Providence. It had an old town charm, the streets lined with red brick walls, the windows of each shop adorned with seasonal logos and endearing slogans. In the winter, the trees that lined the road were covered in white lights, and in 'popular' places, white lights cascaded from one side of the street to the other. When he was a child, growing up in the town, he always thought it looked magical. Honestly, he still felt that way. He was just less likely to say anything.

When Cale approached the intersection, just a crosswalk away from *Brewsing for a Beating*, he noticed that the windows looked a little darker than usual. Worried, he quickly crossed the street as soon as the lights flashed with permission. The lights on the inside appeared to be off.

No no no.

In a desperate attempt to ward off the obvious he pulled the handles on the front doors, but to no avail. The shop was closed.

He internally screamed for a good minute or so, considered screaming out loud, but held himself back. He rested his head against the cold wooden door, took a deep breath, and spun around. If he remembered correctly there should be another coffee shop somewhere nearby.

As soon as Cale finished his 180, he saw it. *Leaf and Bean*. Straight across the intersection from him. Cale had never tried this *other* shop. He was loyal. But today he was desperate, desperate enough to begin his life as an adulterer and begin a torrid affair with the

coffee shop across the road. His first act of infidelity, yet he hardly felt guilty. However, he probably felt more guilty than the average person should be. Given that the average person shouldn't feel guilty about going to a new coffee shop at all.

This new coffee shop was bustling, probably with its usual foot traffic, but also with the added traffic of typical *Brewsing for a Beating* customers who were now lost and muddled in confusion, infidelity steeped with guilt. Like many coffee shop connoisseurs, he was very loyal to his place of business, and going to a *new* store that was *directly* across from the old one... felt blasphemous. Therefore, before he crossed the threshold, he decided that he would hate this new shop, out of loyalty and obligation.

But standing inside the shop, he realized how completely different the vibes of the shops were. At the usual place everything was fairly calm and relaxed, everything had a clear order to it. But *Leaf and Bean* was the opposite.

Upon his entrance his nose was immediately assaulted by the smell of chai, at the other shop, there was no tea, so the aroma was solely coffee-beans-based. While he did really like the smell, he decided to hate it immediately. It was *too* sweet, *too* warm, *too*... nice.

The store itself was square shaped in the front, but it was clear that the shop had lots of room, hidden spaces and nooks, throughout the store. To add to the chaotic atmosphere, all the walls were completely covered, hardly leaving any actual wall to be seen at all. There were street signs, license plates, maps, old timey movie posters, new timey movie posters, and anything else a person could imagine whether it be legal or slightly illegal. Everything was overwhelming, there was no one thing he could focus on. Even the people were crazy, it was so busy, people were chatting, talking, laughing, and it all blended together to fill the air with life. Many of the customers had large signs with them, mostly resting by their feet as they waited for their drinks. He decided not to pay it any more attention as he also got in line to order.

As he waited he peered up at the larger than life chalkboard menu that hung above his head and was again, completely overwhelmed. It listed pastries, sandwiches, coffees, teas, smoothies, and literally anything else under the sun that anyone could have ever wanted. He was feeling very lost.

Quickly he pulled himself out of his tornado of reading when he decided that all he wanted was coffee so that's exactly what he was going to order. Just a coffee. Simple.

Before he could blink it was already his turn at the front of the line, where a lady in her mid twenties was manning the counter.

“What can I do for you? She asked in a cheery tone.

“Can I just get a large black coffee to go? No room.”

“Sure thing, that'll be \$2.75” Damn, it was even cheaper than his usual place. *Brewsing for a Beating* was making it very tricky to maintain his facade of hatred.

He quickly handed her his card, gave her his name and he was good to go. Well, good to go wait on the other side of the line with all the other people waiting.

Despite his gut telling him that he shouldn't stare too closely at all the signs everyone had, he found himself staring too closely at all the signs that everyone had. Maybe there was some sort of protest happening in town, that he clearly didn't have any idea about, but there was a lot in the world that he didn't know about.

He waited, loitering closely to the pick up area of the counter that he had determined was neither 'too close' as to be creepy and annoying to others, but also not 'too far' so as to make it awkward when his name was eventually called.

As he continued to over think everything about the coffee shop around him he heard a shout.

“Order for Emma!”



The life he had been listening to faded, the screaming colors from the posters on the walls, and the chaos of that hideously overwhelming chalkboard menu all faded when he heard that one name.

There was no way.

His whole body stiffened, on high alert, increasing his awareness of everything around him as he tried to focus on the name, and whoever was moving to pick up that order. Of course he happened to be facing away from the counter at the exact moment that the name was called. He could spin around, but that would be so obvious, and what if it wasn't her? But even worse, what if it *was* her? He couldn't turn. Even if he wanted to.

But if he was slow and nonchalant about his turn? Maybe?

*Ok, just turn slowly and casually inspect the situation to see if its her. Slowly, slowly, slowly...*

As he turned, he desperately tried not to get his hopes up, the odds that *this* Emma was also *the* Emma were very unlikely, Emma is one of the most popular names in the country.

When his head was finally in position, all that was left was for him to let his gaze follow as well, he just needed to move his eyes. Out of reflex as soon as he was about to discover the truth, he squinted his eyes shut, too nervous to discover the truth. He scolded himself, if he wanted to know the truth then he needed to look, and he needed to look now. What if it was her and he was gonna lose her again? No, he couldn't miss this chance.

With a deep breath of coffee and chai, he finally opened his eyes, only to have his view obscured. *Typical*. He was no longer getting a direct look at the pick up counter, there was something in front of him blocking the bottom half of his vision.

His neck tilted down to face the obstruction head on and more details started to register.

First being frizzy golden blonde hair.

Second, pale porcelain skin.

Third, playful brown eyes.

Emma.

*The Emma.*

*His Emma*, was standing right in front of him.

While he was still catching his breath, she smirked.

“Long time no see, Cale.”

His heart rushed with the twinkle in her eyes. *She found him.*

## Chapter Seven

### *Emma*

She could barely hear her voice over the screeching of her heart when she spoke the words, “long time no see Cale.”

Her mind was screaming, that was probably the single most cliché line in the history of the entire universe, yet it was exactly what she said, she said that, out loud. Why didn’t she just pretend she hadn’t noticed him?

*You need to trust yourself.*

The blood pounded in her ears as she tightly gripped her iced chai latte in her very shaky and stressed out hands. She looked up at Cale, he still had the same messy brown hair with flecks of golden highlights and the same trail of freckles across his nose. His dark blue eyes were wide in surprise, as he also took her in as well. A burst of butterflies raged in her stomach as she noticed his mouth form the biggest smile.

She had tried so desperately to convince herself that the boy she met on that night wasn’t special, that he wasn’t that great, that he wasn’t stunning, that he wasn’t, wasn’t, wasn’t. But all that hard work went out the window. With that smile.

Just one heart stopping smile.

His teeth shone and the skin around his eyes crinkled.

He was breathtaking.

And life was unfair.

“It’s really you,” he sounded so breathless. So sweet, so thoughtful. It made her regret. She ran away from him, she tried to convince herself of the worst of this nice stranger. She ran away from him.

*Give yourself permission.*

She opened her mouth, but closed it again quickly when no sound came out. She needed to pull herself together, she didn't want to be a coward anymore. With a deep breath her fingers released their vice-like grip on her innocent chai tea latte. And she tried one more time.

“Listen,” she began, “I’m so sorry that I left so suddenly last time. It was rude of me, and I—”

“Stop,” he suddenly interrupted, he even put a hand up to emphasize the command, *damn, was he angry?*

Then he smiled again, softly, “don’t even worry about it.”

His words were so kind, but it didn't eliminate the guilt growing in her heart. So she stared right into his eyes, his gorgeous ethereal blue eyes, and shook her head, “all due respect Cale, but no it was certainly not okay.” She paused trying to decide how much more information that she wanted to divulge.

Once she accepted that she was no good at secret keeping, especially her own, she decided to through all her caution to the wind, *what the hell*, “Cale, I felt something between us that night, and maybe it was just me, but I really regretted not working harder, or at all, to keep in touch, So if you are also interested, I was wondering if I could have your number.”

It was out there.

All on the table.

But she did it, she trusted herself. Now please please, succeed.

The heat was rising in her cheeks, her hands were shaking, she couldn't believe just how forward she was just then. Never in her entire life had she been the first one to make a move with a guy, never. Yet there she was at her regular coffee shop, just having asked for a guy's phone number, and waiting on pins and needles for a response.

Hopefully a positive one.

Those wrinkles around Cale's eyes, the wrinkles she was already so familiar with, grew deeper as his already large and beautiful smile expanded even more. He gave a small laugh and said, "Emma," man did she love the way he said her name, "you are so stubborn, do *want* me to be upset with you?" he gave his head a small shake, his hair growing messier, "I swear."

Swoon.

He faced down to her, maintaining their eye contact. He was really, really unfair, "and of course I'll give you my number."

Relief flooded through her. The angry butterflies left her, leaving her lighter than she had felt in weeks.

She trusted her gut and it worked. And she was happy about it.

Right as she was about to continue the conversation, the barista shouted.

"Kaela!"

Cale's ears perked up noticeably.

*Oh no, would this be another girl that Cale also had a meet cute with and randomly came to this coffee shop today, of course, of course it is.*

Cale started moving towards the counter, slower than usual. He spun his head around searching for something, or someone.

*Oh no, she just made the first move and she was also about to get dropped by him for some beautiful woman named Kaela.*

But when Cale reached the counter, he just picked up the drink.

*He's going to bring her the drink so that she won't have to walk?!*

But instead of walking to someone else he came straight back, a sheepish smile on his face. He held up the cup.

Emma was confused to say the least. But at least he wasn't with another girl. He just stole their drink.

"They always get my name wrong," he admitted.

Oh.

Ooooh.

That was when she burst out laughing, way too loud for a public space, but it didn't stop her. She was such an over-thinker. Without knowing the emotional rollercoaster that she just went on, he started laughing anyway. Together, they just laughed in this coffee shop, surrounded by people, without a care in the world.

Once they calmed down Cale asked, "what were we talking about again?"

She grinned back at him and waved her phone in front of his face, "well, I do believe that you were about to give me your phone number."

Cale grabbed her phone, which she had preemptively unlocked, and opened the contacts page. The phone rested in his hand, but before he began typing anything he looked back at her, "you know..." he trailed off mischievously, "you made a pretty good argument for why I should be upset with you..."

She shook her head as she laughed softly, "oh lord."

"So I believe it would only be fair if you did something for me in order to receive this ever popular phone number." He finished, now dangling the phone in front of *her* face.

"Okay then," she played along, "it's only fair. What would you have me do?" She asked quietly, stepping closer to him with every word.

Once she was a hair's breadth away from his face, she could see the blush in his cheeks, he was embarrassed. She found that adorable.

He cleared his throat awkwardly and then quickly stepped away, “well, in order to get this phone number, you’ll need to go out with me.” His voice was steady, but his face was anything but the epitome of confidence. She found these oxymoronic tendencies of his to be endearing.

So she nodded, “it’s only fair.”

She looked up at the clock on the wall above them and saw the time. Unfortunately she would need to leave soon. But... what if she invited him along?

“Hey Cale,” he focused on her but he clearly forgot how close they were and then began blushing aggressively.

“Yes?”

“What are you doing right now?”

He appeared momentarily to forget his nerves when he showed his gorgeous smile one more time, “absolutely nothing.”

A win.

“Not anymore,” she quickly responded, “now, you’re going to be spending time with me.”

She reached for his empty hand after she gave herself a mental pat on the back for being so flirtatious and smooth, and started guiding him outside.

Once outside, Cale in one hand, Chai tea latte and a protest sign in the other, she decided that it was time for her to ask the all important question. It would be so heartbreaking if he answered this question wrong, but it is a deal breaker and she needs to remember that. No matter how cute or funny a boy is, the wrong answer to this question is the end for anything.

Standing in front of the coffee shop she spun around to look at Cale, only for him to take her breath away. The sunlight reflecting off his hair and his blue eyes lit up with adventure and excitement.

Shoot. She has to focus.

“I have a quick question, and this is going to be make or break for us.”

He nodded in acknowledgement.

“What are your feelings on climate change?”

Here it was the make or break moment. If he said what she feared that would be the end of that.

The lovely boy across from her appeared panicked for a moment when she had mentioned ‘make or break’ but when he responded he was calm and certain, “I believe that climate change is all a hoax.”

This was it.

She knew he was too good to be true.

Oh well, it was a good effort.

Time to give up on the male sex and join a commune.

All she could do was stare at him, her mouth agape, until he started... laughing?

He started laughing so hard that he nearly fell over. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding... I could clearly tell where this conversation was going and what answer you wanted to hear. I mean you’re carrying a sign that says ‘There is no planet B’ with a drawing of a burning planet.” He laughed a few more times, “you make it too easy, you should have seen your face.” Then he began laughing all over again.

Emma wanted to laugh as well, but she refused to give him the satisfaction, so she gave him a light smack on his arm, “jerk.”



They watched each other for a bit as Cale followed her to the nearest intersection, where they had to wait for a signal.

“So just to be clear...” she asked.

“Oh, climate change is 100% real and we are all gonna die.”

“Much better,” she smirked.

As they crossed the street his voice broke through the silence, “So, where are we going?”

“Well my kind sir, we are going to a protest.”

“A protest?” Cale repeated as he looked past her, looking lost in thought before shifting his face to smile her way, “I’ve never been to a protest before.”

“Aww,” she answered in an overly playful voice “I’m your first,” she teased.

Emma had expected him to say something equally flirty in response, but rather, his face turned so red she was almost worried he wasn’t breathing, he was embarrassed.

So she changed tactics, reaching her hand across to his shoulder, “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you.”

His eyes said thank you even as his voice claimed otherwise, “Ha-ha very funny.”

“But seriously though, don’t get too stressed, as intimidating as protests and marches are, they’re actually very low pressure,” she reassured him.

He nodded her way and Emma couldn't resist how cute he appeared when he was nervous. She assumed so much about him when they first met, that he was always confident, that he was a bit of a playboy, but she was wrong. He was clearly nervous and he seemed to have hardly any experience with girls, not that she could really judge him for that, since she hardly had any experience in that department either. In just the few moments that they had spent together she had learned so much more about him.

Up ahead of them, the slow light just decided to change, granting them permission to

cross the intersection, leading her to awkwardly readjust all her things. But before she could drop both her poster and her chai, Cale swooped in. Unfortunately he was only able to save the poster, she desperately tried to catch the chai, which was only half gone, and miserably failed.

It fell.

On to the cold pavement.

Gracelessly.

“Oh no!” screamed out of her mouth.

She spun to face Cale but he was busy trying to smother a laugh, “I’m sorry that's too bad,” he attempted seriousness. But he also failed.

Running out of time on the walking signal they had to continue forward, leaving the chai on the ground. The drink spilled all over, ice melting against the heated black road. Gone too fast.

“Thanks for saving my sign.” She offered him.

“Of course!” He said, but he didn’t hand it back, rather he continued to carry it for her. He caught her sign in his hands just before it would have joined the tea in its gravel-y death. The entire incident reminded her of the night they met, how his strong hands prevented her from falling to the hard floor that night, here he was again saving the day.

“I can only watch so much awkward struggling so much before I step in,” he admitted, lightly laughing, giving her a “tsk, tsk” as he playfully condemned her.

“You know, I can carry my own sign,” she interjected, she was aware that she sounded like a pouting child on the verge of a tantrum, definitely not the vibe she was going for, but unfortunately it was done.

“Emma, because of the way you were carrying this sign you led a perfectly lovely chai tea latte to an early grave, are you really telling me that you can handle the sort of responsibility that comes with carrying such a sign?”

Unsure how to respond, she settled with a “well, thank you.”

His face grew less playful when he smiled at her, “of course, now, let’s go save the world.”

They moved in unison to finally finished crossing the small two lane street, with the one traffic light, when she was once again hit with a feeling of comfort. Wherever she was around him, she felt as though she’d known him her entire life. Just being near him brought her joy and an odd sense of being complete and understood.

She studied his profile as he took a sip of his coffee, (moment of silence for the chai tea she lost) the steam rose from the small hole at the top of the lid and mixed with the cool October air as he took a sip. He had such a long graceful neck, and his messy hair, oh man his hair. He was so handsome. He really took her breath away.

As he finished, she quickly looked away to avoid getting caught studying him, but she doubted that she was ever sneaking enough to get away with it from the start.

“So when does the protest start?” he asked.

“It starts in the main courtyard at Burton and then we’ll walk until they get to the city courthouse on the other side of downtown. It should only take about an hour.”

He nodded again, “gotcha.”

The two of them were only about five minutes away from the starting point, and the closer they got the more people with signs appeared. She was excited.

Emma was about seven years old when she attended her first protest. She rested on her Dad’s shoulders waving a tiny pride flag while her Pops was walking next to them holding her

Dad's hand. Her first protest was so long ago that even her memories of the event were a little foggy, but she did remember a few things clearly.

From her Dad's shoulder she could see everything, the swaths of people were almost never ending. Everyone was yelling and cheering, but the one trait everyone shared was their smiles. Each person she saw was smiling. From that point on, she'd always associated marches with happiness. Not because the topics and reasons they were marching were happy ones, but because people were coming together to meet a common goal. People who have never met, never talked, joining forces to make a difference. What wasn't magical and happy about that?

Amongst the rainbows, the hopeful speeches, and the way people all came together she was moved. Even at the young age of seven. While she didn't know the weight of what everyone was fighting for she could recognize that the sea of people she was with, that undying wave, formed out of a common belief and a yearning to change something together.

From that moment, her legs dangling over her dad's shoulders, her free hand out to the sky, reaching but never achieving, she knew that she wanted to be the kind of person who made change. She decided that she would fight for the things that she believed in, and change what she felt needed changing.

Often, when pondering grand issues like Social Justice and Climate Change, she easily feels overwhelmed. Helpless. The issues were always so big and she was only ever one person. But that all changes when she's at a march or protest. Suddenly, her one voice does matter as well as the hundred or thousands of other voices with her. While one person might not be able to do or influence much, a mass of people with the same goals can.

She has acknowledged that she alone can't change much but her voice added to the many others that surround and support her can do anything.

These marches and protests and gatherings provide the golden hope and support system that people need, young or old.

“So why are you attending this march?”

She was taken aback by his sudden question, “I think you mean ‘why are *we* attending this march?’”

He laughed, “sure, why are *we* attending this march?”

“I am so glad you asked,” Emma said lightly but with a few notes of seriousness, “besides the fact that our planet is dying and many government officials aren’t doing anything to change that undeniable fact, this is also a bit of a personal event of sorts.”

He looked surprised, “personal?”

She nodded, “my best friend Ash is actually one of the organizers of the event. She really wants to work in international climate change policy when she graduates. So *we*” she gestured to the two of them, “are going to be supporting her as well.”

“Alright, sounds cool,” he responded genuinely.

How did she get so lucky to find this guy?

She should stop questioning these things, she’s gonna jinx herself.

As they walked closer to the official meet up location to start the march she turned to him, “you ready for your first march?”

He looked thoughtful for a moment before he answered, “I would be lying if I said I wasn’t a little nervous, but I’m actually really excited,” until his face quickly dropped, his blue eyes filled with panic, “wait, are they going to be mad at me for not having a sign?”

She studied him for a moment, he was joking right? But she couldn't be certain. In a desperate attempt to smother her laughter she tried to cover her face with her hand and her air came out sputtering.

“Sorry, sorry,” she spit out as she tried to catch her breath, “no, *they* won't be mad at you— out of curiosity though, who is this ‘they’ you're imagining?”

He shrugged looking a little sheepish after his minor freak out, “I don't know, they all powerful ‘they’ that many lazy and unimaginative people like me push all their fears onto without any specific person or persons in mind?”

She grinned back at him, “gotcha.”

And with that she led him to the starting point of the march, she gave him a small pat on the back, “you got this.”

Then they stepped into the fray.

## Chapter Eight

### *Cale*

Upon his first glance at the park ahead of him, he lost all ability to think coherently. In front of Emma and himself were at least three hundred people. The park wasn't that large to begin with. The courtyard at Burton was maybe two blocks in area, and the whole place was filled with people. It was a far cry from the peaceful world he walked through just an hour or so earlier. They were all surrounded by lovely trees, pine, maple, and aspen and the grass all around them was a stunning green. However the most remarkable thing that he noticed was the sound. All around him were voices. The air was buzzing with an electric dialogue between people, all were excited, lively, and passionate.

Maybe he really didn't belong here. Everyone seemed to know something he didn't. They seemed powerful, otherworldly. Almost like heroes and if there was one thing he wasn't it was a hero. Emma tried to calm him down, but he still couldn't shake the feeling that he was an outsider here. What was he doing? He didn't belong, he was an imposter. An interloper infringing on the work of others. It felt wrong.

The wind carried the scent of change and anger. Emotions and efforts he sympathized with yet felt completely foreign to him. Was he allowed to be angry for the same reasons? He wasn't sure.

Right as he was about to give into his dark and doubting thoughts that were pooling and collecting in his mind, Emma appeared. It wasn't like she wasn't there before, but something changed. Her presence became more known and when he looked at her, he noticed that she shined. She was already studying him when he turned to face her, perhaps he felt her eyes on him, and when he met those eyes he read them clearly. Her eyes said everything.

She knew this feeling.

Without a single word she placed her hand on his arm and squeezed supportively.

“They all seem like heroes don’t they?” her soulful voice asked.

How did she read his mind? She knew exactly what he was thinking, completely shocked by her empathy all he could do was nod.

“I was really young when I went to my first march,” her voice turned soft as she continued, it was laced with the nostalgia of someone who really loved whoever she was thinking about. “My parents took me, and I’m sure a lot is going through your heads, but just know, that these people you see around you,” she spread her arms wide, gesturing towards the entire courtyard, “these people are just like you and just like me. Average, normal, people, with just as much voice and as much power as we have.”

He allowed her words to sink in and craned his neck to look for what she was talking about.

There were still countless people that astounded him in their sheer numbers, but as he started paying closer attention to each group, to each person, he started to realize that maybe she had a point. Perhaps protests aren’t exclusive groups made up of the elite and powerful. His fear of being an outsider was his primary reason for never participating in events like this in the past. Even if he wanted to lend his support, that fear always talked him out of it. He always figured that he wouldn’t be welcome or that people wouldn’t want him.

A new fall breeze gusted through his hair, the cold orange hand of fall gripped his head and grounded him. He was ready and he was actually excited, any waves of alienation or apprehension were slowly dissipating. He looked at Emma again, who was still watching him. It was clear that she was waiting to see what conclusion he would come to and she seemed relieved to see his resolve to stay.



*Maybe*, he thought to himself, *maybe you just need someone to guide and support you in your first march*. He was so glad that he had Emma by his side and that she brought him here.

“Thank you for inviting me here,” he told her, he tried to convey how much he meant those words.

She smiled at him, “of course,” she replied simply before adding, “but really,” her voice changed to a playful tone, “I just wanted someone to carry my poster.”

He was going to fall for this girl.

Right as she finished talking she quickly nabbed her sign out his hands and he did nothing to stop her from doing so.

He had never felt so sure of anything in his entire life.

A laugh tickled past his lips as she made a face, crinkling her nose and sticking her tongue out at him, “I see,” he feigned shock and sadness, “oh how I’ve been used,” he exclaimed at the blue sky.

Emma, who was now holding her sign triumphantly and quite adorably he might add, she released an evil laugh, “Mwah-ha-ha, you fell right into my trap.”

After they both laughed for a bit and caught their breaths he asked again, “so now what?”

She smirked, oh god how he loved that smirk, “I’m so glad you asked my young padawan learner, we are now just waiting on the organizers to give us their opening words before heading out.”

“And your friend is one of those people?”

“Hem-hem, *Best* friend, and she is like *the* person. Ash was put in charge of this whole march,” Emma answered, he admired how proud she was of her friend. It reminded him of how he felt about his friend Max. It made him happy to know that she had a close friend like he did.

“So what I’m hearing,” he teased, “is that you have connections in high places?”

She nodded seriously, “I didn’t want to say it so explicitly, but yeah,” she said in an overly nonchalant and exaggerated voice, “I’m pretty well connected. You don’t wanna mess with all this,” she gestured to herself.

He really enjoyed seeing Emma so lighthearted. She had always come across funny to him, but the way they’ve been joking with one another was so casual and easy. No fear of judgement. When they first met that night, he could tell that she was a little uncomfortable and guarded. But with this new side that he was seeing of Emma he knew that she was a really fun person. Perhaps that school party just wasn’t a good environment for her, but here at the march her friend was organizing, she could really be herself. He really liked this side of her.

That night, he was so attracted to what she was saying, and he would never forget her Pjs and how she was literally the only person at the university party wearing them, but she was stiff. He could recognize that something was slightly off. But now. As he looked at her, none of that discomfort was present. The young woman standing with him was breathtaking. Her blonde hair was down, slightly wavy, and it caressed her narrow shoulders. The lightness of her hair perfectly balanced out the warmth of her eyes, he was always drawn to her eyes, they were bright with energy and alight with a confidence that Cale found absolutely alluring. This girl who had seemed so mousy before was glowing. This girl had a magnetic aura, he might never escape it, but he might be okay with that, maybe he was even afraid to leave her.

He couldn’t figure out why he was feeling so attached to Emma, he always avoided human connection, he worked hard to push any feelings that he had for anyone far far away. The only person besides his family that he had ever allowed himself to get close to was his friend Max, and the only reason for that was because Max was as annoyingly persistent as Cale always tried to act macho and unfeeling. But this girl. Emma. She wasn’t persistently trying to connect with him, she even literally ran away from him the first night they met without saying goodbye.

So why? He was confused. But when he looked at her as she took in the scenery around her, he was starting to get it.

She was someone who left an impression on people. Emma was unforgettable. Emma wasn't a person placed in the world to be mediocre, no. He wasn't sure how he knew it, but he could tell that she was going to achieve great things. She was special and he treasured that.

She was going to change the world.

And he wanted to see every second of it.

While he studied her, taking in every detail from her frizzy hair to her trendy brown leather boots that reminded him of a protagonist from a dystopian movie, he felt her gaze fall to him.

He knew he should have felt embarrassed or ashamed for having been caught, but when he felt her eyes, her warm brown eyes, filled with a fire that he knew would change the world, he decided that he would never miss a chance to catch them.

His neck moved, leading his head to the angle that would best meet her look.

Shoes.

Skinny jeans.

Light pink sweater.

Round nose, bitten by the cold.

That was it. The moment that solidified everything.

He finally reached her eyes.

All the life that surrounded them, the gushing words and shouts, the scent of the breeze and the hint of distant waves, the light of the sun glinting off the leaves and sneaking between branches, all faded away, growing dimmer and dimmer, until all that was left was a slim fraction of whatever it was before, leaving everything nearly silent except for her breaths.

He knew that they would wind up staring at one another, the one thing he didn't predict was that she would be looking at him with the same gaze that he was giving her. Her mouth was serious, not smiling but not growing either, but she wasn't angry, just thoughtful. He felt warm, even in the late autumn air. She peered at him, the angle of her neck the complimentary partner of his own.

Time flew by, he had no idea how much, with them just staring at one another, the world far beyond them. They probably would have remained there forever, unmoving, until they were abruptly taken out of it by a voice with a megaphone, "hello everyone and thank you for coming!"

Their moment was gone.

## Chapter Nine

### *Emma*

She stared straight ahead towards the small stage that the organizers of the march set up in advance. She tried her best to focus on the elegant and motivating speech that Ash was giving, but she couldn't escape the constant replay of the events that had transpired just moments before. She couldn't get the face that Cale made out of her mind. The way his light brown hair ruffled in the breeze, the way his freckles seemed to sparkle perfectly complimenting his eyes. She could have sworn that she saw the sky perfectly reflected in his infinite eyes.

*That was a moment right?*

She shook her head, she needed to snap out of it. She came to support her friend and the changing climate, there were more important things at stake. But even with this new found determination, she kept finding herself looking his way and then having to stop and condemn herself for doing so, *come one girl, focus.*

“—things might be daunting when we face them alone, but when we face them together, we can do anything,” Ash's voice cheered through the crowds, “So let's do this everyone,” she finished with a powerful fist in the air.

The marchers hollered back clapping and hooting. This was a good crowd. Everyone appeared to be loud and in a good mood. It was always disappointing when a crowd at march was quiet.

“Nervous?” she asked Cale.

“Psshht, me nervous? Never,” he answered in the single most sarcastic voice she'd ever heard.

“Don't worry,” she attempted to calm and reassure him, “I'm right here with you.”

She looked him right in the eyes, trying to show him how much she supported him and he stared right back, they steadied each other. While she thought that perhaps she should have been more embarrassed by making prolonged eye contact with him like that, especially right after the moment they just shared, but she wasn't. Maybe they both felt that way about each other, safe and comfortable.

He appeared convinced by her words and every hint of fear slowly erased itself from his body and face, "so what do we do now?"

"Now," she smiled at him, "we march."

They had been walking for an hour and half, cheering and hollering, but it was all jovial. The people they passed on the street cheered them on too. The entire crowd was energetic and positive, so charismatic that anyone both in the crowd or just observing from the street could tangibly feel the crackling energy that surrounded them all. It was contagious.

When they finally arrived at their destination, the small city courthouse made of mostly red brick and made up tall towering greco-roman columns, the energy of everyone remained strong. Their end point was exactly what one would expect of a courthouse from a small town, it was cute and old but also official and weighty. Small but powerful.

She and Cale quickly swooped to steal a bench in the back of the group, they had taken their time with the march, slowly drifting further back as they continued to talk with one another.

"You didn't actually do it, did you?" Cale gasped incredulously.

She couldn't believe that she was actually telling him this story, but she had gone too far now to turn back, "Yes, yes I did. But in my defense when you're a freshman in the dorms living with like five other girls, bad ideas don't sound as bad as they should."

While she was a freshman she and her five roommates decided to create a boyfriend wanted posted with guidelines, rules, and expectations. It even came with pull off tabs with a

phone number generated from a free wifi texting app. She had received great pick up lines, jokes, and even a few resumes. Nothing ever became too serious but it was a lot of fun and the poster became a bit of an icon. A few people even created some spin-offs such as the ‘Husband Wanted’ poster. It was a fun time, albeit incredibly embarrassing.

Cale released a loud sigh and a quiet laugh, “I can’t believe that I have actually met the ‘Boyfriend Wanted’ poster girl. No wait, scratch that, I went on a march with ‘Boyfriend Wanted’ poster girl. It’s kind of like meeting a celebrity not gonna lie.”

“Ugh,” she placed her head into her hands, “looking back I can’t even tell you the exact motivations that went into making it,” she moved her face up resting it on her hands. “One moment it was more of a joke, the next minute we were at the printers in the lobby with ten freshly printed posters.”

“Man,” Cale shook his head, “to think that if I answered it, we could have met a lot sooner.”

What if Cale had answered the poster? She probably wouldn’t have taken him seriously, they honestly wouldn’t have gone anywhere. They definitely wouldn’t be on a march together.

No point in thinking what ifs though.

She groaned, “it’s so embarrassing. I’m glad we didn’t meet that way. Also, I ended up sharing the fake number account with my roommates so you could have ended up talking to any one of us.”

Cale whistled, “wow, I call this day a win. Max won’t believe it.” He paused suddenly, then looked at her with the cutest puppy dog face, “I can tell Max right?”

Oh no, now he was gonna tell all his friends. But she trusted him, for some godforsaken reason, she really did. And that puppy face made her heart melt, “yeah, but now your best friend is gonna think I’m a weirdo.”

“Oh was that supposed to be a secret?” He teased.

Damn, he was too quick witted for his own good.

She laughed and he joined her, this was the most she laughed in a very long time, it was nice. She sat next to him on the bench, the voices and thoughts harmonizing together.

“I do explicitly remember getting a few very professional-looking resumes,” she shared with him.

“Really?”

She nodded, “mhhh, I also got a few not-so-professional resumes, but all in all a lot more resumes than I expected.”

Cale in turn just shook his head in wonder, “I feel like I just solved one of the greatest Burton College mysteries of all time.”

“Don’t get so cocky, you asked me for an embarrassing story and that was definitely my most embarrassing story. Also! You didn’t solve anything, I just told you everything about it, you solved nothing.”

Cale sat thinking for a moment, “alright maybe you have a point, but when I retell this story—” she coughed to get his attention, he understood her meaning perfectly, “to just Max,” she nodded appreciatively, “I will change a few things.”

She was about to respond when she noticed a small distortion in her vision. It looked like a tiny oval on the right side of her vision, but she knew it would get bigger in a few moments, “shit” she muttered under her breath.

Cale startled at her change in tone, so she spun to him quickly, “I’m sorry, I’m so glad that you had a good time, I did too, but I have to go now.”

“Wait,” he gently grabbed her arm, “what do you mean, what just happened?”



The distortion was expanding across her vision appearing somewhat like a mirage one would see when they rub their eyes too hard. The shape was both visible and not at the same time, creating a strange and frustrating blind spot. She hated that she was confusing Cale but she really needed to go, it was only going to get worse.

As she stood up he joined her and held on to her, almost like he was afraid that she might disappear at any moment, which wasn't wrong.

"How familiar are you with migraines?" she asked him, he deserved an explanation.

He shook his head, "I'm not familiar with them at all."

She was unsure of how to proceed, should she explain or just leave as fast as possible? She needed to get home before the more dangerous symptoms started.

"Well," she decided to explain, "I get chronic migraines and the really bad ones have a two step warning system almost. The first one is what's called an aura."

Cale was watching her and listening intently.

"A migraine aura is like a blind spot, it can start out small and then grow bigger. It can also move around. And while it exists and you know it does, sometimes it can be hard to pinpoint. Like you can see it but you can't *look* at it."

The man across from her was listening so carefully taking in her every word.

"I'm sorry its so hard to explain."

"Don't worry, I'm getting it, at least a little," he offered speaking softly and offered a hand to her, "what's the second sign?"

She gripped his hand in hers, "the second sign is the scariest, and it only happens after the aura passes," she took a deep breath, seeing was getting particularly difficult and she needed to close her eyes. So she gripped Cale's arm for balance.

While her eyes were still closed she continued, “the second warning sign is paralysis on half my body, it starts small, usually with a single finger or a toe, then quickly spreads across the rest of my body.”

When she finally opened her eyes again, vision still greatly impacted, she was able to make out his small smiles, his looks of concern, and his support for her. Unfortunately, almost all of her vision on her right side was gone.

“Cale?”

“Yes?”

She hated asking for help, but here she was, “Can I ask you a favor?”

“Yes, anything.”

He was too good for her, but she was so grateful.

“Would you be able to help me to my car? I can’t see what I normally can, and I might need some guidance. I’m so sorry.” She attempted to remain strong and confident, but her voice started to crack as she finished talking. The one thing she hadn’t mentioned to him yet was the pain that came after the warning signs. In an hour she would be in so much pain and she was afraid. She didn’t want to go through that, but she had to. And she hated it. Tears started to build in her eyes, why did such an amazing day have to end like this?

He rubbed slow circles around her arm, “of course I’ll help you, and don’t feel bad at all, I understand having weird and annoying health conditions. Let’s go, we should get you home before the paralysis hits. I’ve never been paralyzed but I bet it’s hard to drive.”

She released a small chuckle. He was perfect, “thank you Cale.”

“Let’s get going,” he responded kindly.

With his strong arms guiding her, the pair slowly made it back to her car in an attempt to beat the clock.

The first time Emma had ever experienced one of these ‘paralysis migraines’ as she called them, she was a sophomore in high school. She had been getting migraines in general with auras since she was around eight years old, but the paralysis was something new. She remembered it vividly. It was early on a Thursday morning and she was taking her once weekly early morning honors class that took place an hour before the normal school hours started.

The room was cold and absolutely quiet except for the professor’s voice lecturing the classroom. It was a day that had felt like any other and she was enjoying class like the school-loving-nerd she was. Until while she was sitting at her desk, notebook out, scribbling notes, with her right hand and the paralysis started. The first tingle made an appearance on the pinky of her right hand, the hand she was using to write. At first she didn’t mind it, thinking it was just a limb falling asleep like any other, but then the sensation started to spread. It flew up her arm, like an invading plant, it itched and expanded its territory. Eventually she could no longer write her notes.

So she sat there. She stared at the useless hand that rested on her notebook, not moving and she genuinely feared that she was dying. She assumed that she might have been having a stroke, unsure of what to do exactly, she chose to do nothing, electing silent suffering. The class around her slowly faded away until it was just her and her paralysis and the ugly war of silence that they were having, a battle with no victors, only losers.

When the bell finally rang twenty minutes later she hardly noticed. She just sat. Unmoving as the rest of her classmates just left the room slowly, chatting, taking breaks before their next classes. Alone she sat, her pen and notebook abandoned and her arm hanging limply, unfeeling and still.

Her eyes slowly pricked with tears, *was she dying?* She knew that if she were, dying in her classroom would be a horrible place to go.

Then.

As soon as it started.

The paralysis disappeared.

But that was only the beginning.

She barely registered that they made it to her car when they arrived, until Cale asked her politely, “Are you going to be okay to drive?”

Oh did she want to say yes, she hated having to rely on people, she was so proud of her independent self, and Cale had already helped her so much. But, she could barely see, let alone focus on all the moving parts of a road, and the paralysis couldn’t be too far off and she really didn’t want to be driving when the paralysis hit.

She answered reluctantly, “Cale,” she leaned herself against the passenger door of her car that was parked near the coffee shop, “just remember that you’re allowed to say no, ok?”

He nodded but they both knew that he wouldn’t say no.

“The next stage is paralysis, and I’m scared that it could start while I’m driving and I don’t want to hurt anyone. Would you be willing to drive me home? I’ll let you take my car back to your place so you won’t have to walk or take the bus back.”

Without a single second of hesitation Cale held his hand out, “Keys?”

She couldn’t even make out his entire face, but she knew that he was probably wearing the most determined look, it was unfortunate that she was missing it since it was probably fantastic. So she quickly grabbed her keys out of her pocket and handed them off to him.

He unlocked the car and before crossing over to the driver's side he opened the door for her. She nearly cried from gratitude, then he quickly got over to the driver's side to take her home.

Throughout her entire life, she never allowed herself to expect anything of anyone, ever. It wasn't that she thought everyone was mean and heartless. It was more of a don't expect people to do things for you, kind of thinking. If she could figure it out herself then she would simply do it alone, no matter the difficulty or the awkwardness. *Don't expect others to go out of their way to help you*, she always told herself. People are busy and they have their own lives, duties, and responsibilities, never expecting anything. Thus she became one of the most stubbornly independent people ever. She felt bad for ever being an inconvenience for people, but when Cale agreed to help her, she didn't feel bad. Nor did she feel like a burden. She was just happy. Why would someone help *her*? She didn't know, but she felt so at ease and content, in a way that she'd never experienced before.

When they arrived in front of her apartment, he refused to leave without walking her to her door like the gentleman he was, she struggled to get her keys out of her pocket, but even as she slowly gripped her keys, Cale was patient. He stayed by her side. Once he had firmly gripped the key, she embraced the smoothness, coldness, and sharpness of it, welcoming back the sensation she had lost for the ten minutes that it had taken them to arrive.

Together they walked into her dark space, the blinds on her porch doors directly across from them were shut, limiting the natural light, and all her lights were off. She briefly wondered what Cale thought of her apartment, it wasn't super homey or colorful. There were a few photos here or there, but that was it personality wise. She led the way, without turning on any switches. She was finally past the aura and the paralysis stages, but that left the migraine itself. Her migraines made her sensitive to light, sound, and movement, so she'd leave the switches off. It

was a decision that Cale didn't seem to question. Based on the intensity of the auras and the paralysis this migraine would probably be a nasty one, she was afraid of what the next few hours would have in store for her. There was no meds she could take to fix this, advil and acetaminophen would do nothing for her.

When she turned left into a small hallway, she finished the journey and walked into her bedroom to the right. Quickly, she kicked off her shoes and clumsily landed onto her bed like a toddler just learning to walk.

Cale had been following her close behind and she could tell that he was nervous and wanted to make sure that she was safe.

She got comfortable, or as comfortable as she could get and laid on her side, slowly sinking into her soft bed, quietly whispering to him, "thank you." Her voice again started to break so she stopped and she sensed the familiar feeling of tears hiding in her eyes.

Cale knelt down beside her bed closing the distance between them. She noticed again how beautiful he was, and their eyes met perfectly.

He reached his hand onto her forehead, his hands were warm and comforting, "of course," he answered, "I'm sorry you have to fight this battle alone."

The pain of the migraine was starting to bubble around her head, radiating with no exact location, but her eyes widened at his words. She could never thank him enough.

She could tell that he was preparing to leave, but before he got up he moved his hand away from her forehead, until it found her hand. He gripped her hand with a certainty that she needed, he grounded her, "This might seem silly," he started, "but I'm giving you my strength."

It wasn't silly at all.

"Thank you," Emma whispered again as he finally stood up.

*Thank you* she thought as she watched his back after he turned away from her.

*Thank you.*

## Chapter Ten

### *Cale*

Cale closed the door to Emma's room as quietly as he could. He never had a migraine before, but he knew that they made any attack on the senses extremely brutal, so he figured that it would be best to limit any loud or sudden sounds as much as he could.

He padded down the hallways feeling a little bit like a burglar in a stranger's house, which was really only half wrong. Her apartment was clean, it reminded him a lot of his half of the dorm he shared with Max. It felt familiar. The whole place smelled like laundry detergent, or rather, like that wonderful scent of a dryer after just finishing a load of laundry. He breathed deeply, embracing the comfort of the smooth scent. As he was about to walk out the front door, he paused, giving one last look to Emma's door.

He was frustrated that he couldn't do more to help her. His words kept replaying in his mind *'I'm sorry you have to fight this battle alone.'* Those words couldn't ring more true. He would fight alongside her if he could, but she had to push through, alone. In a dark apartment. With no sound. And no one else.

The hand he rested on the handle of her front door gripped tighter. His knuckles turned a pale white with the tension. What could he do for her? How could he help?

Then he realized.

He could do something for her.

His idea was either absolutely terrible or a stroke of complete genius, maybe he was riding whatever high Emma had when she created the 'Boyfriend Wanted' poster, but he had an idea.

Maybe he couldn't take her pain away, but he could do something.



He stepped away from the door and went back into her apartment. He quickly found her car keys and her apartment keys. Once he had her keys in hand he made his way once again to the front door, with a renewed determination. He stepped outside and locked her front door behind him.

About forty minutes into his grand plan he started to feel a little guilty about, as he liked to put it, “borrowing” Emma’s keys after he finished at the grocery store and was heading back to his dorm building. He wanted to help her out and do something for her that might bring a smile to her face. So he did the first thing that he could think of, he hoped to any almighty being that Emma wouldn’t be *too* upset with him.

He had done some research on these types of migraines and learned that they could last for hours. When he left her place around 2 pm he figure he had enough time to get things in order.

When he was about five minutes away from his building he dialed Max’s number on his phone and put him on speaker.

“Pick up, pick up, pick up...”

As the cell phone ringing filled the car, Cale relaxed into the fabric of the driver’s seat of her car. Her car, unlike her apartment, wasn't super clean. It was cluttered in fact, and Cale knew that he would have nightmares about the disastrous black hole that called the middle arm rest home until the day he died. It gave him goosebumps just thinking about it.

Just as he turned on to university property Max came on the line.

“Cale? Is that you? Where have you been?” He asked, sounding genuinely confused.

“It’s kind of a long story and I’ll tell you all about it later, but right now I really need to know if anyone on the floor happens to have a casserole dish I can borrow?” He rambled out.

Max was quiet for a moment, before answering, “on it.”

He was so grateful to have a best friend like Max who he knew would always have his back. After Max agreed to this mission, he left Cale on the line. While he couldn't quite make out the details or any of the specifics happening in the background, but he could tell that Max was going around door to door asking people if they had anything that closely resembled a casserole dish.

Such a bro.

Right as he parked in a very conveniently located parking spot, must be his lucky day. Max came back on the phone, "Ok good news. We found one," he paused before adding exhaustedly, "bad and somewhat unrelated news, a lot of the guys on this floor have no idea what a casserole is."

He locked up her car with a satisfying beep, and walked into his building, he chuckled, then said, "are you disappointed in them?"

"Yes, very."

Cale laughed as he walked up to his floor and headed straight for the common area kitchen, and to no surprise, Max was waiting for him, casserole dish in hand.

He quickly hung up his phone just as Max did the same.

"So are you gonna tell me what you're scheming this time?" Max asked, swinging the dish in front of his face. He could tell that his friend was trying to sound cool and judgemental, but he could see that there was a hint of excitement in his eyes and that his friend would be down for anything no matter how he answered.

"I am going to make Mom's homemade bacon mac and cheese for—" he broke off. What was Emma to him? A friend? A girl (space) friend? A crush? Ew no definitely not a crush that sounds awful.

He cleared his throat deciding to start over, “I’m not sure if you remember her, but I spent some time today with that girl that I met at that party last month. We randomly ran into each other at a coffee shop and then one thing led to another and we spent the whole day together.”

Max smirked, “you’re telling me that *you*,” he said pointing at him, “are cooking” he paused again dramatically gesturing around the kitchen, “for a girl?”

He just nodded, lifting up his bags of groceries with his slight shrug.

Max’s smirk turned into a big smile as he turned to the sink and started washing his hands, “we better get started then, because if *you* of all people want to impress a girl you’re gonna have to pull all the stops and take all the help you can get.”

He knew he was teasing, but he was glad to have some help. He really wasn’t the best cook, but how hard could his mom’s casserole be? Cale walked over to him to wash his hands before they got started just as he did the same.

“Oh,” Max added, “ and we’re probably gonna need to check that everything in this communal kitchen works, since I’m pretty sure we’re gonna be the first people to use this kitchen since it was built.”

After cooking the pasta, draining said pasta, cooking the bacon (which led to way too many student-athletes walking by to sneak a peek and a few pieces much to Cale’s dismay), melting the cheese, chopping the bacon, mixing it all together in the casserole dish. Cale finally sprinkled the breadcrumbs on top and placed the dish, now heavy with ingredients, in the hot oven.

The dorm kitchen was small but all the appliances were new and completely unused as Max had assumed. There was a small table with four chairs that resided across from the oven where Max was sitting, his head lolled back in exhaustion.

“We did it,” Max spoke with an empty enthusiasm.

He chuckled, “yes we did.”

The clock above the stove read 3:16, they made really good time making this casserole and getting it in the oven. By around 4 pm it should be ready to take on the road, back to Emma’s place.

Max readjusted his body, so he could look at Cale sitting across the old wooden table, even though the appliances were new, the furniture definitely wasn’t.

“Now are you gonna tell me why we made your mom’s special comfort casserole in such a speedy fashion?” Max asked Cale, raising a questioning eyebrow.

Cale let out a breath, he decided it was time to share. He leaned forward resting on his arms as he started his tale. He began with how Max’s sticky note had woken him up and how he was forced to try a new coffee shop since his usual place was closed for god-knows-why. Then explained the miracle that led to him seeing the mystery girl again and how she had invited him on a march. Cale grew more solemn though as he neared the end of his story, describing how Emma had started to experience a really horrible migraine and how they had to cut their time short.

“Ah, so that’s why you are making the casserole for a girl.”

He nodded, “yeah.”

“I see.” Max paused, appearing deep in thought. Then added looking at his hands resting on the table, “so... did you tell her that I responded to the ‘Boyfriend Wanted’ poster?”

Max asked in a voice that would have sounded very nonchalant but his face and eyes gave him away since he looked so panicked, his eyes wide in alarm, and his face as pale as a ghost.

Cale sputtered before releasing the largest laugh.

“What?” Max asked defensively, “did you?”

Cale kept laughing, unable to contain himself.

“Oh god you did,” Max exclaimed, “now your girlfriend is going to think I’m weird.”

The laughing turned softer and quieted down as Cale remembered fondly how Emma had said the same thing about Max just hours before.

As if on cue, just as he caught his breath and the kitchen was covered in a blanket like silence, a metallic ding from the timer alerted the pair that the casserole was finished.

The clock read 3:45 when he quickly jumped up and took the casserole from the oven. Max methodically set a new timer for fifteen minutes.

“What are you gonna do now?” Max asked.

“Oh you know, the usual. Take this casserole to a girl’s apartment in her car that I temporarily assumed possession of and sneak into her place with the keys that I also happen to have as well. Nothing too crazy.”

Max let out a small whistle, “if you get caught, and the police arrest you for breaking and entering, I’m not going to post your bail.”

“Yes you will and you know it,” Cale told him with confidence as he delicately wrapped the casserole dish in aluminum foil.

“Oh!” Cale announced.

“What?” Max asked, startled.

“Do you have any more of those sticky notes by chance? I ran out when I used them to identify the muscles on you last weekend.”

Max put his finger to his chin as he thought, “yeah, I think I do let me go grab them.”

Max left to retrieve his notes as Cale stared proudly at the crinkled metallic surface of his casserole feeling very proud of himself.

## Chapter Eleven

### *Emma*

Time stopped existing for Emma. She suffered through the main act of her migraine curled into a ball on her bed, sitting in the darkness for what could have been days or hours. She was exhausted. Everything about being alive caused her pain. Taking a breath, any slight movement, any sound, and a shift in the light, it all hurt. Everything was causing so much pain, that after an unknown amount of time, she started to forget what it was ever like to be without pain. Until finally it started to pass.

Emma was definitely still far off from being perfectly fine, but when Emma rolled over she saw her clock read 6:23 pm. and she was starting to feel like a human again. She was able to think back, after she left the march with Cale around one, so she'd been in bed for around five hours. Only five hours, but it felt like lifetimes.

The horrible thing about migraines is that everything causes you pain, thus she couldn't read a book, watch a movie, or anything along those lines. She couldn't listen to music or dance or move at all. Every sensation, every nerve ending caused so much pain, the hair on her scalp hurt, the feeling of her neck resting on her pillow hurt, there was no reprieve. And time stood still. The only real option left was to sit in her dark room and pray to any one listening for it all to end soon.

She was so bored in that room, she was in too much pain to sleep, so she just sat. In the dark. For five hours. But finally, it was starting to pass and she could start to emerge and explore her apartment once again.

She slowly rose from her bed, the pillows that had been thrown around over the hours falling to the ground. Her bed was warm, but the air around her and outside of her bed was cold and unforgiving. The carpet of her room was soft against her feet as she stepped across her room, heading towards the door, as she dragged her warm comforter along with her. Curled up in her warm soft bedding and appearing much like a burrito monster of some sort she made the escape from her sad pain-filled room.

She opened her door slowly, careful to avoid the horrible squeaking, eventually tugging the door open. She was cautious as to not to make any sudden moves as well, like she was a baby deer wandering alone in a forest filled with predators. Only her body was the predator and the smallest trigger would leave her right back where she started. While everyone's migraine symptoms are fairly similar, they can also vary. The sense that affected her the worst was movement. So whenever she had a migraine such as this one, she made sure to move slowly and fluidly. Or rather as slowly and fluidly as her clumsy body allowed.

Her house was so quiet and still, it felt almost dead. Which was nice for her migraine but also freaky for her comfort. *Oh* how she wanted to turn on some lights, but as she walked down her long dark hallway, she knew that she would have regretted turning any on. So she settled into the shadows as well as she could.

Once out of her hallway, she was disappointed to find that her living room and kitchen weren't much better. She gently sighed as she turned right to head into her kitchen. She knew she needed water, she was definitely dehydrated and knew that having some water would help her migraine as well. Burrito Wrapped Emma™ made a beeline for the fridge, and when she reached it, she grabbed the smooth white handle and braced herself for the sudden light that she knew would soon fill the room. She scrunched her face and looked away as she quickly threw the door

open. Finally, she peered in to grab her Brita filter for her water, only to be greeted by some unfamiliar glassware and aluminum foil.

There, on the most prominent shelf in her fridge.

Resting right in the middle and staring right back at her.

Was a casserole dish wrapped in a luminous aluminum foil.

And sitting on the top of that silver wrapping was a yellow note.

Emma reached in and peeled off the yellow sticky note covered in sharpie. Along with a seven digit phone number it read, “Thought you might be hungry, heat up in the microwave whenever you want. Text me when you get this so I know you’re okay - Cale”

She immediately felt warmth spread all over her body.

She almost started crying tears of thankfulness. She had never had someone do something so thoughtful for her. As her eyes glistened, starting to feel tearful as she stared at this large casserole and the cute note that adorned it, a rumble filled the room.

Her stomach screamed for attention and the casserole sitting in front of her was ready to oblige. She reached in and took the dish, which felt cool and heavy in her arms. Emma then scoured her kitchen for a spatula of some sort to divvy out a portion (or two) of the cheesy, greasy, and heavenly looking casserole for dinner.

Looking back, Emma realized that she had only had a chai latte today. That was it. No wonder she was so hungry and tired.

She opened the last drawer, her final hope, and there it was a cheap plastic spatula. Success.

The spatula was quickly followed by a ceramic plate and then used to scrape out a rather large serving of the gooey goodness. Once plated Emma placed the plate in the microwave for about ninety seconds to test the temperature.



That was the moment she realized that it was a little strange that Cale had been able to give her a casserole.

He clearly didn't cook it in her apartment.

Emma certainly didn't have the ingredients for this sitting in her apartment.

Which means he had to leave.

But then...

It dawned on her. He would have had to come back.

Microwave counting down, and comfort casserole bubbling, Emma started towards her room again for her phone. She had a key stealing boy to interrogate.

How did you get back into my apartment??- **6:40 P.M.**

**6:40 P.M.** - You're going to have to be more specific. I borrowed a lot of keys today ;)

Emma released a hot breath, *he thinks he's funny, doesn't he?* She responded aggressively, the taps on the cold screen of her phone echoed around the empty apartment.

cale. - **6:41 P.M.**

how. - **6:41 P.M.**

She leaned back proud of her decision to ask how with a period, she felt it added the necessary dramatic effect her texting needed. Then her phone buzzed.

**6:42 P.M.** - 'Thank you so much for cooking for me Cale, that was so sweet of you.'

Emma was a little irked by that response before she also received the following,

**6:43 P.M.** - Ok ok, I do actually feel guilty about stealing... excuse me, 'borrowing' your house keys.

Emma smirked, she knew she could get it out of him. Then her phone buzzed again in hand, she peered down unexpecting.

**6:43 P.M.** - Also

**6:43 P.M.** - I may have borrowed your car????

Emma knew that she should be a little more upset, but she did say he could use his car to go home in return for taking her back to her place. And he *did* cook for her, and that actually made her really happy. The microwave rang out again, while she was texting Cale she had to reheat the casserole about three more times, but this had to be the final turn. She took the dish out of the microwave, it was finally ready.

Her whole kitchen had started to smell like warm melty cheese and sizzling bacon. Her stomach was growling even louder now. Emma couldn't wait to try. She sat down at her couch, still wrapped like a burrito in her comforter, and took a bite.

Flavor exploded into her mouth. The cheese, she wasn't exactly sure what type of cheese it was but it was delicious. And together with the bacon, it was the perfect savory mix. The pasta was cooked exceptionally and the whole thing just gave Emma an overwhelming feeling of warmth and comfort. After four bites she realized that she might eat the whole dish tonight, and she was okay with that.

Finally, she turned over her phone, she decided she had made him suffer in silence long enough.

Cale - **6:50 P.M.**

You are - **6:50 P.M.**

So good at cooking :) -**6:51 P.M.**

She saw those little texting dots appear on her screen letting her know that he was working on a response. Emma smiled to herself as she rose to go grab herself another serving of the casserole. This thing was addictive.

Her phone buzzed.

**6:51 P.M.** - really?

She hadn't expected him to be so nervous and self-conscious. Emma was really starting to like this guy. He was funny and understood her humor but he was also selfless and serious when he needed and wanted to be.

Yes, really. - **6:52 P.M.**

**6:52 P.M.** - How are you holding up?

I finally feel like a human again, and this casserole is helping even more - **6:52 P.M.**

**6:53 P.M.** - I'm glad to hear that!

**6:53 P.M.** - I realized that you hadn't eaten anything the entire time we were together.

Emma glanced up from her glowing screen. He knew before she even realized. The microwave rang out and she jumped up before getting too lost in her own feelings.

But Emma was happy, really truly happy.

She never went out looking for love, and honestly, she had never expected much out of love or to even find it, but perhaps she could let herself get excited.

Whatever this was with Cale she felt deep in her heart that it was going somewhere.

**Bar·gain** /'bɑ:gən/

gerund or present participle: **bargaining**

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1: a deal struck between two parties, usually in a mutually beneficial way

2: an object that was a great deal or cheaply bought

3: a desperate plea to an all powerful being; a hail Mary

## Chapter Twelve

### *Cale*

The sweet crisp scent of chlorine filled his nose while the sound of water splashing and whistles echoing filled his ears. The competitive swimming season didn't start until the spring, but that didn't mean that things were calm in the collegiate swimming world before then. He was busy assisting the coaches for the team as he always does. He had been tasked with getting the times for all the freestylers 100 meters.

“and...Go!” Cale shouted as he clicked the stopwatch, commanding it to start counting. It had been a few days since he last saw Emma. But they'd been texting back and forth for a while and they were going on their first official date in just a couple hours.

He just had to get through this practice first. All the swimmers blasted off their blocks while the sound of his 'go' still echoed across the water. He loved helping the swimmers find their way and improve but when some of the bigger guys dove in, there was always a splash. This time with Gabe, being the swimmer closest to where he stood, was no different. Cale quickly raised his hands that were both holding either a stopwatch or a clipboard with ever so important sprint times written on it and leaned away. He thought that he probably closely resembled one of those car dealership noodle men, but at least the tech was *pro-tech*-ed. Cale laughed at his own joke quietly.

As the seconds ticked by he could hear Gabe returning to the wall long before he saw him, the smooth splashes of the water as he kicked and spun his arms rhythmically and progressively getting louder. Cale turned to closely monitor his finish, crouching down and moving his neck with Gabe's finish to ensure that he got a perfect time.

Gabe touched the wall and in the blink of an eye lifted his head from the water, tearing his cap and goggles off, while he gasped for air.

“How did I do?” He demanded excitedly.

Cale pulled out the stopwatch, “43 seconds.”

Gabe slapped the water proudly, his face expanding with a smile, “yes! This puts me around a 42 or a 41 for a meet right?”

Cale thought for a moment, “it very well could,” he reached his hand down to Gabe forming a fist, “keep it up” he cheered with an equally large smile.

While he could never be a swimmer himself, he loved coaching, granted assistant coaching. But he loved it. A close second. For a moment he wondered if Emma would want to come to a meet. Their official season didn’t start until spring, but if they were still a thing by then, she could totally come. He couldn’t explain it, but just the thought of her visiting her happy place gave him butterflies of excitement.

Man, he was far gone.

He bumped fists with the swimmer, then Gabe quickly and silently, like a ninja, rose from the water making way for the next swimmer.

“I’m off now right?”

“One sec,” Cale responded.

Zac, the team’s strongest distance freestyler, rose to the block.

“Take your mark” Cale started in his best meet timer impression sounding extremely empty and monotone. The distance swimmer crouched, preparing for the signal. The tall black-haired athlete froze watching the water in front of him as if daring it to move before he did.

Finger on the stopwatch’s small button, “go!”

Cale then turned to Gabe while also making the same car dealership noodle pose, “yeah now you should be off, but go check with the coach before you leave. Great work today.”

“Thanks, boss” the swimmer responded, beginning to walk away but then he paused.

Zac was on his way back, so once again Cale squatted by the water watching his every move, making sure the timing was perfect.

The swimmer slammed into his finish, he looked up still clad in his goggles and cap asking without physically asking, “44.”

The athlete gave a small proud smile.

Yeah he’d definitely want to share this side of himself with Emma, maybe he would wait to warn her about the splashing though... She’d be so pissed, but it would be pretty funny.

Then Gabe’s voice rang out, “So Cale, Max was telling everyone on the floor that you have a date tonight.”

Cale blanched embarrassed. While he wanted Emma to see this side of him, maybe her meeting the team would be a bit much.

He’d been texting Emma virtually non-stop since he left the comfort casserole in her apartment last Saturday. Emma sent him a text on Monday explicitly asking him out to a movie night hosted by the student government.

And of course, Cale told his roommate *and* best friend Max about the whole thing, and who would have thought he was such a blabbermouth.

Gabe crossed the small distance between them and looked at Cale.

“Cale,” he said in a nicer tone than Cale had expected, “let me be the first to say, if it doesn’t work out,” he paused dramatically so Cale knew nothing good was coming, “tell her I have great shoulders to cry on.”

Yeah he was definitely not bringing her to the pool deck, this place would only be seen by her through the stories that he told her about it.

Cale sighed, and stared him down, “Gabe, go away.”

And the tall annoying swimmer sauntered away towards the head coach, he raised his arm in the air and waved without turning to face Cale, “good luck,” he shouted in a teasingly musical tone, “you’re gonna need it.”

A laugh escaped Cale, but it landed hollowly. He wished he could put on airs but instead his nervousness escaped him. The thoughts of failure and awkwardness and embarrassment rose to the surface. Spinning and spinning and spinning. This was his first time going on an actual date with a girl, practically ever. *Oh God, what if—*

Before he could finish his thought, a large wet hand gripped his shoulder, tearing Cale out of his spirals. Standing right in front of him was Zac. Dark and quiet Zac.

Cale opened his mouth to try speaking, but he wasn’t quite sure what to say to Zac, who was always kind of an odd person.

But Cale didn’t have to stress about the silence for long because then Zac offered, “you can do this.”

Zac was incredibly tall. But he was also very quiet which had always caused him to seem very intimidating to lanky Cale. But when he told Cale that he could do it, he had the strongest voice Cale ever heard.

It was the kind of voice you have to believe.

“Thank you” Cale genuinely answered, nodding.

Okay plan ‘Bring Emma to the Pool’ was back on.

Zac also nodded and gave Cale a little squeeze before also heading away towards the head coach, and Cale was left standing on the pool deck watching after them standing alone.



*Maybe I should talk with Zac more often.*

Cale shrugged and looked down at his watch to see its face blink 4:32, Emma said she would pick him up at seven-thirty, so he had plenty of time to shower and get ready for their date. He took a few long deep breaths, he reminded himself that he would be ok.

He walked along the pool deck heading towards the office on the far side of the pool next door to the locker room entrance. He needed to return the timer and the recorded freestyler times to their rightful place and check with Coach.

Once Cale got close he noticed that everyone was in a huddle type thing and then he heard Coach's rich and weathered voice rise above them all, "Alright, nice job today team, keep up the good work. I have a good feeling about this next season." Then he added, "Oh and everyone wish Cale good luck on his date tonight."

Cale froze, his heart lurched in panic, even *Coach* knew. He was going to have to have a long chat with Max when he got back to their dorm.

Following Coach's words all the guys, about twenty of them all whistled and hollered and gave him a pat on the back as they walked by him to enter the locker room. But Cale didn't move, he was waiting to die of embarrassment.

As soon as the last swimmer was gone, leaving just Cale and the Coach.

"Cale," Coach started as he walked closer to Cale, "I'm really happy for you."

Cale was shocked to see that Coach's eyes were lined with tears, the whole team knew about his health situation, and Coach was extremely understanding.

"Thanks, Coach."

Ever since he was a kid, Cale had always been infatuated with swimming. The way the water moved with the swimmer, the way chlorine smelled the magical moment when everything grew completely silent on the deck before the whistle would ring.

But Cale could never be an athlete.

His heart wouldn't be able to take it.

So he watched.

Always watching.

Until one day when he was in high school after he had fallen out with his cronies. He had been wandering around the school alone after everyone had left and gone home. Cale remained, but then he heard the whistle and the following splash.

In the small Oregon town of Providence, with its cold winters and brutal storms, the last thing Cale ever expected was a high school swim team. Heck, he didn't even know his school had a swim team. But then on that fateful day, he heard the whistle. Like a zombie, he walked toward the sound, controlled by a will that was not entirely his own.

The building at the end of campus had its front doors propped open like an invitation. Cale continued his march, and he can still remember the first time he walked down that hallway. The evening's golden light shining through the front door behind him, and the teal light coming from the windows and doors ahead of him. He could feel the air shift, becoming muggy and warm, a nice shift from the bitter air he had left outside. The further from the world and the closer to the water he got, a rushing sound filled the air. Cale's ears slowly adjusted to pick up on the subtle noises and their differences.

The echoes of voices.

The slap of bodies crashing into water.

It all beckoned him.

Eventually, he reached the end of the hall, where large windows filled the upper half, looking out over the pool deck. To his right was a door, a gate that opened to this secret world. Cale wasn't sure how long he stood there watching as students raced, swam, and dove with the guidance of their superiors. He could almost feel the tears of the swimmers who failed, and the euphoria of the swimmers who succeeded. He could feel it all.

Young Cale was so transfixed by the view in front of him that he didn't notice the young man approach him.

"Hey kid" he called nicely.

Cale jumped startled and peered fearfully at the doorway to his right. The man was young with dark hair and a blue tracksuit.

"Do you like swimming?"

Cale wasn't sure what to say so he simply nodded.

"Would you like to come inside?"

The young assistant coach gestured his head to tell Cale to follow him. And Cale did. The moment when Cale's feet crossed the threshold, from the dark hallway to the bright and humid pool deck changed everything. And marked the moment when Cale would finally join something and find a place where he felt that he could do good and support and guide people who needed it. Cale, for the first time in his life, felt helpful.

So when he came to college, he did the same thing. He marched straight up to the coach and told him everything, How he couldn't physically swim, but how much he loved the sport.

Coach crossed the distance between them and placed a hand on Cale's shoulder and squeezed before he walked past him.

Wow.

He was so lucky to be a part of such a great community. It made him so happy. How had he never noticed how great everyone on the team was.

While Cale had been embarrassed by the fact that the entire team knew about his date and teased him about it when everyone had left, the way Coach gave him that loving squeeze made all that anger fade away. It faded because all he felt was love and affection for the team he called home.

As the last one at the pool, he was tasked with closing up. On his way out, Cale smiled softly to himself as he turned off the lights.

## Chapter Thirteen

### *Emma*

Emma had been trying on outfits for at least an hour and a half. Her best friend Ash was sitting on her living room couch holding Emma's phone in her hand. On her phone was her younger sister Mira, who was facetimeing her and was also helping judge her many outfits.

She didn't want to admit it, but she was nervous for her date with Cale. The two of them had gotten along so well when it was casual but she couldn't help freaking herself out worried that maybe the pressure of an actual real date would cause them to self combust. Emma had actually been super excited about the date but as the hours crept closer her panic level had started to increase. *What if—*

"Hello," Mira's young and sing-songy voice filled the room, "Earth to Emma."

Emma shook her head in an attempt to clear it, "Sorry what was that?"

Both Mira on the phone screen and Ash sighed simultaneously. Her younger sister cleared her throat before replying, "I was saying that this outfit is my least favorite outfit so far. What do you think Ashley?"

Ash spun the phone to face herself, "I was thinking exactly the same thing."

Emma aggressively sighed. This was the longest night of her entire life, and it hadn't even started yet. She still had about two hours before she was supposed to meet Cale and drive him to the movie.

"So what do I do?" Emma asked the villainous pair exasperatedly and desperately.

And almost as if they practiced, the two spun to face Emma and said, "You let us take care of it."

It was definitely a little, okay, very, nerve wracking for Emma to yield all control to the mischievous pair across from her, but they had been slowly wearing her down all night. After she nodded and slung back on to their spot on the couch and they scampered into her room, Emma realized that perhaps that was their plan the entire time. She sighed softly in acceptance of her current predicament and leaned her head to rest on the back of the couch. Closing her eyes and allowing her entire body to still.

The only sound that filled the room was Emma's deep and slow breathes. They filled her lungs with calm and expelled any unwanted negativity and nerves that she had built up in preparation for her date with Cale tonight.

Her thoughts dived for everything Cale. The sandiness of his light fluffy hair. The dusting of chocolate freckles across his nose. And his eyes. *God his eyes...*

Emma had never spent much time in the ocean, but his eyes were as deep and fathomless as she imagined the ocean. And be just as blue and just as wonderful. Laying on her couch imagining his face, she could almost imagine waves crashing around the borders of his iris.

He was beautiful.

But he was also kind and funny. He teased her and she teased him, she hoped that he felt similarly to how she did, but Emma couldn't help but feel that they perfectly balanced each other out. And even in the brief moments that they had spent together, she knew that she could trust him.

Emma was in shock at the depth of her feelings for him. She had never experienced any sort of relationship like this. In all honesty, she'd never really been in any sort of committed relationship before. Only passing flirts and fleeting kisses, nothing much and certainly nothing that lasted. Perhaps she had commitment issues. She couldn't pick a major or anything remotely resembling a future path let alone find and commit to a person. But here she was.

As her mind danced in thought, she realized that maybe the fact that she had moved around so much as she grew up could be the reason. Both her Dads were very open to new opportunities and adventures. Ready to go wherever the wind blew them, they were unafraid of risks. This was a trait that Emma always admired, how anytime they got a job offer or heard of a new perfect fit, they would go for it. No regrets. But maybe having that constant movement in her life, without roots, was why she couldn't imagine herself settling down with anyone or anything.

Emma opened her eyes and grabbed one of her decorative throw pillows that were resting peacefully to her left and threw it over her face in exasperation.

*Maybe pursuing Cale was a bad idea. Why would he want anything to do with this mental mess?*

The calm that Emma started with was gone. It was replaced with restless self-deprecation and frustration. With the pillow now secured over her face, she let out a nice scream. Emma's shoulders sagged with release, she felt better.

Emma freed the accosted pillow and looked out only to see a pair of long legs in denim standing right in front of her. Her head panned up to see a very confused Ash holding up Mira on the phone.

"You saw and heard that too little Davis?" Ash stage whispered at Mira, never taking her mocking wide eyes off of Emma.

On the bright phone screen, seventeen-year-old Mira just nodded slowly, "Unfortunately, yes." Then they both started laughing mercilessly in complete synchronicity.

It was a little spooky how similar the two of them were, but she loved how well they got along, well, as long as they never used their uncanny similarity against her.

Emma in her embarrassment tossed the unlucky pillow at Ash who stood unflinching and continued laughing as Mira took a breath to mimic ‘The Scream’ as they termed it. Which led to even more violent giggles. Eventually, even Emma broke down and joined in, even she had to admit that it was hilarious.

Amongst the laughs, gasps, and sore abs, Emma’s tunnel of self-doubt and shadow faded out of recent memory. Lost in the happy distraction.

Emma stood in front of the body mirror in her bedroom for seven minutes staring at the outfit her sister and Ash chose. They had decided on a thick mustard yellow sweater, a fitted maroon skirt, slightly less opaque tights, and dark brown ankle boots. They also told her that she would be wearing a dark blue denim jacket when she left. Her hair, which was normally a mess of not-quite-curly-not-quite-straight-frizz actually felt in almost graceful curls down her shoulders. And her brown eyes looked bright against her skin and the yellow sweater.

They did a good job. She begrudgingly admitted to herself.

Finally accepting their tasteful help she walked out to the living room to show them what their work had finally achieved.

“Ta da” Emma squatted briefly with jazz hands when she reached them.

“Ok,” Ash started, “what do you think mini Davis?” as she spun this phone around.

Mira put on a quizzical and neutral face humming slightly as she took it all in. It hit Emma again how different they looked. Mira had dark and very straight hair, and her skin had a lot more of a tan to it. And her eyes were this lovely brown green hazel. Her sister was also much more like Ash when it came to social hangouts and popular culture, which is why they got along so well and constantly succeeded in achieving their goals wherever Emma was concerned.

With a decision made, Mira continued, shattering Emma out of her thoughts, “Ash?”

“Hmm?” Ash replied.



“I think we nailed it,” Mira told them in a very drop-the-mic-kind-of-way.

An evil grin spread across Ash’s face, “hell yeah we did. Virtual handshake.”

Then in front of Emma’s eyes the two of them started doing some god awful dance thing, that had clearly been planned, but planned poorly. Once they appeared to be at least close to being done. Emma thanked them both.

“Seriously, you guys are amazing! I was so nervous I forgot anything about cohesiveness. I don’t even want to talk about outfit number seven.”

Ash’s face grew serious, “we shall never talk about outfit number seven, ever. Again.”

Mira nodded solemnly on the camera.

“Never.” Ash added again for good measure.

“Cross my heart,” Emma vowed with a smile.

They all smiled at each other, feeling good about their accomplishment when Ash broke the silence, “ok mini Davis, time for you to skedaddle. I’m sure your sister will call you when she’s back.”

“Aw,” Mira released the whining sound, “fine, but Emma you better call me.”

“You know I will” Emma answered.

Mira gave nothing but a stern nod as she signed off the video call.

Emma gestured towards Ash to give her the phone and Ash complied. The phone was now in desperate need of a charge after being used in a video call for over an hour.

After plugging the phone in, Emma came back to the living room to chat with Ash, and maybe assuage her nerves as well.

“Ash, I was thinking back and I honestly don’t think I’ve ever gone on an actual real date since high school, and hell, I don’t even know if lame high school dates count. I’m so nervous, I think I really care about him.”

Ash looked across the couch at her friend, “no matter what happens you’ll be ok.”

Their eyes matched and Emma replied, “yeah, I know.”

Ash’s arm reached across and she gripped her friend’s shoulder with a wide grin upon her face.

“Ash,” she began quietly, “how can someone make me feel both incredibly confident and also so nervous? When I’m around him, sometimes I feel so comfortable with myself and so sure, but right now all I feel are butterflies.”

Ash’s eyes widened in shock and realization, then she laughed.

“What?” Emma demanded.

Sober she answered, “I’ve never heard you talk about a guy like that before. I know I haven’t met him, but I can’t help but see the way your face changes when you talk about him. I know you say you’re nervous, but I think what you’re really feeling is excitement.”

Excitement? How was the feeling of adrenaline rushing through her blood and the inability to hold still excitement? Though, the thought of running a hand through his soft hair and getting the chance to maybe hold his steady hand, didn’t feel dreadful. No. That idea feels like something to look forward to.

Ugh she had a point.

“You’re right.”

“Yeah, I always am,” Ash said proudly.

With a playful shove Emma said, “Thanks, for helping me realize how excited I actually am. I actually can’t wait to see him.”

“I expect all the details when you come back ok? I don’t care how late, you call me as soon as you can.”

“Will do.”

With the last few words of support passed between them, Ash left the apartment with a long hug from Emma. As if Emma was trying to gain as much residual confidence as she could from Ash's aura. Then she was gone, with a click of a door, leaving the residence that had been bustling with energy moments ago silent except for the slight buzzing from the air conditioning unit down the hall and the blood that was starting to pound in Emma's ears. Again.

Emma ran her hands down her soft sweater and attempted to smooth her skirt, a skirt that was already smoothed to perfection. She peered across her place to look for the time on her oven.

7:15 p.m.

Ok, it was time to pick him up.

She quickly ran around collecting all the things that she thought she might need. With her black purse slung across her shoulder and resting at her hips she made a quick stop in the bathroom to check her appearance.

This would all be ok, she told herself.

On her way out the door Emma quickly grabbed her keys and phone. She stepped out her door, locking it quickly and returning her keys to her bag for safe keeping, only to feel a buzz from her phone in her hand. Without a thought she turned the device over.

A bright white banner greeted her with:

*Can't wait to see you - Cale*

The sun peered from behind the clouds, it had always been there, waiting, and Emma had forgotten all about it.

With a smile on her face she walked to her car as the wind blew through her hair and a song whispered on her lips.

## Chapter Fourteen

### *Cale*

“How do I look?” Cale asked his less than interested roommate.

Max spun his head for what must have been the twentieth time that night, “I’m going to level with you” he began, “I still have the same knowledge of fashion as when you asked me the first ten times.”

The grey shirt was soft against his skin and now layered with a red athletic jacket. A swishing noise accompanied every movement with the jacket, and it was already grating on his nerves.

“I know I know, but is the sound this jacket makes as loud as I think it is?” Cale asked his voice raising an octave with each word and gaining speed.

With a sigh, his kind and patient roommate answered, “sure, yes, it’s so incredibly loud, stick with the flannel you chose before.” And with a flick of his wrist, he returned to his work at his desk across the room.

The flannel felt too casual but maybe it would work, and it was definitely more comfortable than the red athletic atrocity he had on in the moment.

Exhausted he leaned his head against the cool metallic surface of his lofted bed when a short tone caused him to reach for his phone.

**7:20 P.M.** - On my way!

Then quickly followed by,

**7:20 P.M.** - I can't wait to see you too

With those seven words, he was reenergized. He grabbed his flannel, it was a black and nicely complimented the ash-gray of the shirt that would be showing underneath.

He softly patted his hair, no matter what he tried it would always be unruly, but he convinced himself that it was a part of his charm.

“Cologne?”

Without looking up, “What do you think?”

A pregnant pause.

“No...?”

Max raised his finger to his nose then pointed back at Cale. The correct answer then.

“Ok,” Cale started as he started putting on his shoes. “I guess I’ll see you later then...”

He waited, wanting to hear some sage words of advice from his wise friend.

Nothing.

“Goodbye...” he tried again.

Nothing.

Cale shook his head as he turned to leave the room, “you’re the best.”

When he was halfway out the door Max answered, “and don’t you forget it.”

A small animalistic screech escaped his lips, “*that* you answer to? Figures.”

Another ding filled the room, “Ok she’s here. Wish me luck!” and Cale jogged out the door.

He shut his door behind him and was greeted by cheers. Startled Cale looked up to see almost the entire swim team waiting for him outside his room.

They had all lined up on both sides of the hall and they clapped and hooted.

Cale smiled in surprise, “you guys, what is this?”

A voice popped up, “Good luck on your date”

He was followed by a series of ‘hell yeahs’ and as he walked down the hallway all the boys put their hands out for high fives. Laughter filled his mouth, tickling his teeth and crinkling his eyes as he met each and every one of their outstretched hands. Once again he was hit with the overwhelming feeling of home. Since he was younger he avoided friendships like the plague, but apparently he had been forming them along the way without him knowing. The entire swim team had his back, they were his friends, and he wasn’t alone. Maybe, just maybe, he could be *normal*. Leaving a trail of resounding claps behind him as he started something that would eventually save his life.

A flirty whistle filled the air as Cale approached Emma who was waiting in her car in the parking lot right outside of his dorm. Her lovely hair pooling out the window as she leaned out to greet him.

“Where’d you learn to whistle like that?” He asked her once she was in earshot.

She gave him a devilish smile, “wouldn’t you like to know?”

Gosh, it had only been a few days since he saw her last but she really took his breath away while also making him feel just right. He walked around to the passenger side of the car and hopped in.

As he clicked his seatbelt into place he commented, “I think this is the first time I’ve been a passenger in this car.”

The sound of quiet pop music filled the car when she replied, “don’t think I didn’t notice what you did to the jockey box.” She gave him a sideways glance.

“Ok first thing, jockey box? Are you a sixty-year-old man? And second, how did you live with that glove box the way it was for so long?” Just thinking about how it used to be sent shivers down his spine.

“Ha-ha, ok I guess it was pretty bad. And sixty-year-old man?”

It was his turn to give her a sideways glance, “come on jockey box.”

She shook her heads as she let out a quiet laugh, “this is gonna be fun,” she said as they pulled out of the parking lot on to the open road.

Cale then leaned over and cranked the music up, it was a pop song from a few years back that he hadn’t heard in a long while but had a bass that simply couldn’t be ignored. Slowly he reached for the window button and rolled it down, feeling the breeze and smelling the harvest. Wet hay, the scent of laughter and pumpkin pie. An overwhelming feeling of joy.

He reached his hand out caressing the air letting it dance across his palms and tingle his fingers. Daring a glance, Cale turned to look at the diligent driver next to him.

She was wearing perfect fall colors, all those feelings of nostalgia, harvest, and warmth personified. But her eyes. Hit with the last few rays of golden light as the day was coming to an end, the brown melted. Becoming an endless caramel color, warm and glowing. They looked endless and lovely. Her lashes moved gracefully with every blink delicately kissing her cheeks, who’d have thought he’d ever feel jealous of eyelashes. There was a first time for everything he supposed.

And she was stunning.

Cale was so transfixed that he hadn’t noticed when the car had reached a red light giving her the opportunity to return the favor, and suddenly her face met his. Just like the march, he wasn’t startled, simply content to see her and to be seen by her. If only the light could be red just

a moment longer, but no luck, soon they were off again, and Cale peered out his window once more inviting the dancing wind to join him one more time.

Lost in the leaves and infinite colors Cale almost didn't hear her, "Earth to Cale."

He shook his head as if he was just waking up, "yeah?"

A smile broke across her face, such a breathtaking smile, "we're here genius."

With new eyes, he took in his surroundings. It looked like a typical pumpkin patch, but in front of their car, across the parking lot was a clearing of hay with what looked like a giant screen similar to a drive-in set up. Emma had already gotten out of the car and walked around to his door before he could unbuckle his seatbelt. She smirked at him as she held his door open for him.

As he rose from the car he never took his eyes off of her. He noticed how the sky behind her was deep indigo with pink clouds on the horizon, and the first few stars started peaking out.

"What a gentleman," he joked but his voice was quiet.

She blushed, "what can I say? I love to spit in the face of gender norms."

He held out his arm for her after she locked up the car behind them, and she gratefully took it. She felt so warm and perfect standing next to him. Smelling like roses and rain.

"So do you know what we are going to be watching tonight?"

"I'm not entirely sure," she admitted sheepishly, "but I assume it's going to be something Halloween-y since its mid-October."

"Are you a fan of horror?"

"Oh god no," she said adamantly.

"Good me neither."

"Now look who's defying gender norms," she teased.



“What can I say? I spit in the face of gender norms,” he said puffing out his chest over zealously.

Emma laughed so hard bringing her hand to her mouth in a pointless attempt to stifle it, “I can’t believe I said that, I don’t think I’ve ever spit anything in my entire life.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have told me that, I am only interested in spitters.”

She snorted her laughs getting away from her, and it was so adorable, he decided that he would do anything to hear that sound again.

Once they approached the designated movie viewing field they were surprised to discover how busy it was, nearly all the blanketed spots had been taken save a few in the very back.

“Shoot, I’m sorry I should have said I’d pick you up earlier,” Emma said, sounding extremely disappointed.

Nope, she would smile all night, he made it his personal mission. Cale grabbed her hand and started walking to the back spots, “I didn’t come here for a movie, I came to get to know *you*, so let’s do that.”

He turned his head to see her reaction and was pleasantly surprised to see that his silent vow had worked as he was greeted by the sweetest smile he’d ever seen. Worth it.

“Alright” she agreed with a nod.

Hands intertwined they made the trek to the back of the field, their shoes crunching in the hay beneath them, and the feel of humid air making its way from the ocean miles away in the cool nighttime temperatures.

The last spot available was quiet, the air was still except for the sounds of them sitting down and the grains breaking below them as they got situated.

“This is actually a pretty nice setup,” Cale said shattering the silence.

They had been allotted a very large blanket as their spot and they were also given two soft pillows to rest on as well.

“I know, I should participate in school events more often,” Emma said.

Ahead of them, what seemed like lightyears away on the now small looking screen the movie had started playing, some old-timey black and white horror movie. Unfortunately, where they rested they couldn't hear a sound.

“Is it supposed to be silent?” Cale asked, unable to keep a straight face.

Emma put her face in her hands, “oh my god, probably not,” her voice crackled with laughter.

“I'm sorry this date is such a bust,” Emma said as she turned to him.

Cale felt his face lose all emotion, growing serious, “don't apologize, you don't ever have to apologize to me. This is honestly some of the most fun I've had lately. So please don't, I'm happy just being with you.”

Woah. He just said that.

The heat began to rise in his cheeks. Shoot.

But she just smiled, “I'm happy being with you too.”

He released the breath he hadn't realized that he'd been holding, and the weight of the world lifted from his shoulders.

“So, tell me about yourself,” he started.

“Any questions in particular or would you like the complete autobiography with commentary?”

“Definitely the complete autobiography with *extra* commentary please.”

With a breathy laugh she said, “Ok, well I was born in California then moved to Idaho and bounced around there for a bit then moved to Utah before coming here for college.”

That's a lot of places, he had never lived anywhere but Providence, "were either of your parents in the military?"

She softly shook her head, "I get asked that every time, but no. My dads are just go-getters, any opportunity comes their way and they take it. I honestly really admire that about them, but it was definitely hard always changing schools and homes." Her eyes drifted somewhere far away. To a place he couldn't go, but in the blink of her chocolate eyes and the light came back as she continued, "but I have my little sister Mira. 'M' for short, and we went through it all together. We didn't realize it when we were younger, but now she's in highschool and I'm almost done with college and we realized how much we love each other. We are a lot closer now, 'two peas in a pod' my parents call us." She exhaled with a sweet grin.

"I can't even imagine living in so many different places," Cale admitted honestly. "I've lived in the same house here in Providence with my Mom and Dad my entire life. Although now I'm living on campus, that's the furthest I've ever gone." His voice drifted, becoming quieter with every word.

It wasn't until that moment that he realized how much he longed to travel, to explore, to see and learn about the world. But that light, that dream, that hope, was immediately covered up and hidden away. No time to wish for what could never happen. Put it away.

As if she could hear the subtle longing in that tinged his voice, it spooked him how well she could read him, she said, "well, I always longed to grow up in one place and with the same people for my entire life." Her blonde hair bounced, falling across her shoulders and streaming down her back, as she turned to make direct eye contact with him, "the grass is always greener."

His eyes crinkled with uncertain emotions. But what if the grass on your side was dying, what if all that's left is the dirt, abandoned, drying, and alone, left without a single hint of life?

"Yeah it is," he agreed.

## Chapter Fifteen

### *Emma*

“Tell me more about you,” Emma started.

“Hmmm” he turned his gaze away appearing thoughtful.

Emma was actually having a really good time, even though they couldn't hear the movie and quite honestly couldn't really see it either, they were just talking.

“Well,” his voice sounded like crisp water rushing through a river in the fall, “As I said before I've always lived here in Providence. My Mom is named Kathy and she is the sweetest most kind mother that has ever existed. She's always there for me. Then my Dad, Frank, he's your classic stoic middle-aged man. He's quiet most of the time, but when he talks its always with good reason. No siblings though.”

When asked about himself he talked about other people, why did he do that?

“What are your favorite things?” Emma tried again, perhaps a more specific question would guide more personal answers.

“Well I love the sport of swimming,” and everything about his face grew softer, a certain life came to his eyes just thinking about swimming.

He continued on, “I could never play myself,” his tone made it feel self-deprecating, like he was in bad shape or just a poor swimmer, but it felt odd, like she wasn't getting the whole picture, “but I could watch swimmers for hours and hours. There's just something so amazing about seeing them dive off the blocks to land perfectly every time. Then transition in an instant from pure grace to cutthroat racing. It's a perfectly balanced sport.”

Then she realized, “oh wait! You said you were a coach's assistant or something that first night, tell me more about that.”

“Well you see, if you have enough confidence you can do anything. So I walked in, ok no I *sauntered* in...”

Eventually, and without their permission, the movie came to an end, and people started to pack up and leave. All except for the two of them in the very back of the field. She was laughing and talking with Cale, without a single care in the world that everyone else decided to call it a night. And honestly no one really cared about the two of them still sitting in the cold. It seemed that any onlookers thought they were irrelevant, but to them nothing else existed in those moments than the other person.

As she thought about it, she realized that she couldn't even remember the name of the movie or what it was about because they spent the whole night talking instead.

She knew that she would keep on talking to Cale, and vice versa, for the rest of the night, for days even, but then some poor soul was tasked with turning off all lights once everyone was gone, and the two in the back didn't have much of a presence, so with a flick of a switch darkness invaded.

And the scream that resounded across the field surprised everyone.

“Oh calm down you big baby,” Emma scolded Cale.

“I'm sorry it just came out, I think the bigger concern is how you were completely fine with the lights randomly turning off, that's much more strange, why are you so comfortable losing all light? Huh?”

With a sigh Emma said, “we aren't completely in the dark, I can still see you and you can still see me, there are plenty of other lights around us.”

A comfortable silence fell over the two of them as they started walking back to her car, the last car in the large lot.

“So...” Cale started, trailing off dramatically, begging for a response.

“Yes?” curious even though she knew she probably shouldn’t be.

“We are gonna keep that... shout, that’s what we’re gonna call it, a secret right?”

A sputtered laugh escaped her lips as she reached out to pat his shoulder, “yeah sure, but don’t worry I’ll protect you.”

As she uttered those words, *Don’t worry I’ll protect you*, she realized that she had said those same things to him before, when she took him to the march for climate change. Wait a minute, “Cale, I just realized that I’ve planned out both of our dat—” she quickly broke off, she was going to tease him about needing to plan the next one, but is this a date? Are they dating? What is this exactly?

While she was losing herself in thought she forgot that there was a cute boy standing right next to her watching her with curiosity, as he should be, because she just stopped talking mid sentence like a crazy person. She could feel her face turning tomato red.

He stepped in, “Huh, I guess you’re right, you have planned both our dates,” gently he draped his long arm across her shoulders, then turned his head to look at her, his face was so close, she could feel the warmth from his breath and see each and every detail of his blue eyes, they had a slight darker border right around the pupil then it lightened up as it spread.

They reached her car, but neither of them made a move to go inside.

He was still so close, he smelled like melted snow and sunlight, and he felt so warm, so safe and sure, he was becoming her anchor.

She wasn't sure who made the first move, perhaps it was a mutual understanding, but she leaned her back against the cool metal surface of the car, the iciness came as a shock, but she didn't care, because he was standing right in front of her.

Together alone in this empty parking lot, under a single lamp post high above them, the stars hidden by a blanket of dark shadowy clouds, they leaned closer.

Softly he whispered, "maybe I'll plan the next one."

She had nearly forgotten that they were talking about dates and planning, he was such a distraction when he was close he was all she could think about.

In response all she did was close the distance, matching her lips with his and it felt as though an orchestra had been waiting in the wings and suddenly began to play. A crescendo had been building and in this moment of sweet release, everything came together.

He placed his hands on the back of her head and neck, he was so gentle but so confident at the same time. His mouth was everything she'd imagined it to be, and damn he was a good kisser.

When they finally broke apart, her hand was still resting on his chest and his hands were in her hair, and they just watched each other as they caught their breaths.

Then it started to snow.

Slowly and without any wind to stray its path, it fell to the ground.

Emma always loved the snow, and this was her favorite type, large flakes, so big they almost don't seem real, and falling like a movie. Peaceful and serene.

She looked up at him, his goofy smile matching her own as they closed the distance between each other once again, not for a kiss, but rather something closer and more intimate. They just held each other, hearts beating together, they leaned on one another. Her head rested against his chest, and he tilted his head to rest on the top of her own. They fit perfectly.

Before long they had started swaying, dancing to music no one else could hear.

“When you plan our next date,” Emma began, “good luck beating this one,” she taunted.

He moved around so he could look her in the eyes, “Jockey Box,” his new nickname for her, since her glove box was so messy, “is that a challenge?”

“Maybe” she answered playfully.

“Challenge accepted,” he said joyously.

He paused in thought before adding, “but you can’t seriously take credit for the snow.”

“I am and I will.”

He laughed into hair now flaked with new snow, “I know.”

Emma never really looked for a relationship, and she’d never been in a real one, but in this moment she felt so excited for what the universe had in store for her.

“Do you think I would be a good Doctor?” Emma asked Cale as she laid on her couch. It had been about a week and a half since their first date, and he hadn’t been able to plan out their next official date yet since he was so busy with biology and chemistry and studying for MCAT that he had scheduled to take early next month. So they decided even if they couldn’t do anything super fun together, they could still study together. And so they did so basically everyday. She couldn’t remember what the world was like before he arrived in it. Did she just study in her living room alone? How strange.

“Em, I don’t want to crush your new and exciting dreams but you nearly threw up all over your carpet when I showed you a presentation for my anatomy class.” He was sitting on the ground in front of her working on the coffee table. She had offered him so many times to take the couch, but he always refused, claiming almost believably that he actually ‘preferred the floor.’



“How rude,” she pouted exaggeratedly. The two of them had been working hard for three or four hours, she was cranking through a paper and revisions while he was running through some really nice looking MCAT flashcards. Maybe—

“Wanna take a break?”

Like a ray of sunlight shattering through thick cloud cover his voice answered her thoughts.

She sat up slowly, “Yes please,” she said, releasing a breath, she stretched a little and internally cringed as her back cracked loudly.

Cale was rustling as he put papers away and carefully stored his MCAT cards. “What kind of food do you want?” he asked absentmindedly.

He stood up from his spot on the ground, all his things still scattered around the surface of the coffee table making her wonder what it could have possibly looked like before all the shuffling of papers just moments earlier. She stood up with him, and all the blood rushed to her head, she paused putting her head in hands.

He closed the distance between them and placed a hand on her arm supporting her, “You okay?” he asked quietly.

She smiled internally remembering how he took care of her when she had a migraine, “Yeah she reassured him,” looking up at him once she was back to normal, “just a head rush.”

And he was right there. Just an inch away.

Even though they have studied so much together, when they ‘studied’ they really do study. It didn’t leave time for much else. But he was standing right there, only a hair's breadth away from her. She could feel the heat radiating from his body and smell the snowy scent of him.

His face was just as beautiful as it was before, but resting on his nose were an adorable pair of reading glasses.

She laughed, reaching to take them off, “How did you forget you were wearing these, they’re for reading, I’m probably super blurry right now.”

She quickly freed them from his nose and delicately folded them on top of his ocean of papers as she prayed to whoever was listening that at least *he* understood the organization of.

“So, what kind of food do you want?” he asked again.

“Hmmm, I’m not sure, you know I like pretty much anything, is there anything you want in particular?”

“Honestly? I really don’t want any meat.” He shivered and made a gruesome face.

It didn’t take much thought to get what he was saying, “Okay, so something vegetarian...”

Cale walked towards the front door to grab his coat, and Emma quickly followed after him.

“We could do rice bowls? From that new place down the road?” She offered.

“Alright, let’s do it.” After placing his jacket around his shoulders he helped Emma with hers.

“Thank you,” and then she leaned over and gave him a quick kiss.

“If I knew that you’d be so grateful, I should have started doing that much sooner,” he responded with a dorky grin.

Emma laughed, “I try to keep you on your toes.”

“Ok let’s do this,” Cale cheered as he walked with purpose down the hall already leagues ahead of Emma, the weary study drained student from moments ago completely washed away.

“Ok ok I’m coming I’m coming.”

Emma jogged to catch up to the boy waiting for her at the end of her hall hand out stretched waiting just for her. Everything with Cale just felt so normal, like he had always been there. Waiting at the end of her hall, haloed in cheap neon lights. A smile permanently etched on his face. A joke always on the top of his tongue. And the brains to keep her waiting on the edge of her seat. She had trouble imagining life before Cale.

He squeezed her hand in his, and carefully rubbed his thumb around the back of her hand, “Em, I don’t know what I ever did without you.”

“You know, I was just thinking the same exact thing.”

## Chapter Sixteen

### *Cale*

Even when he closed his eyes all he could see were practice MCAT questions, terms like *glycolysis* and *stoichiometry* eternally bouncing around in his numbed and exhausted brain. And he still needed to finalize the list of medical schools that he was applying to, not to mention start submitting his applications. Cale had at least ten tabs that had been open on his computer since late September all with applications for medical school that he had started but never finished.

Every time he got even the slightest hint of motivation he would run to get working, but just as often he would stop himself as he hit wall after wall. He would stare at the colorless computer screen in front of him and start to feel completely useless and start to sink in the pointlessness of the whole thing.

*Two Years Two Years Two Years Two Years*

A never ending loop, that only seemed to speed up as time continued to go by. Why was he even considering attending medical school? Why even entertain the idea?

Deep down he knew why.

That no matter how negative his thoughts spiraled, there was always *always* a single voice of his that maintained that painful hope. That maybe just maybe he would make it and have a full life, usually that voice was what fueled him, getting him through the day, but as he continued to fail at applying to medical school the voice grew more annoying with every personal statement and every flashcard.

So he kept pushing. Never closing those tabs on his browser. Just in case.

Just in case, for all those what ifs, and maybes.

Cale sighed, he needed a break.

“Are you doing something for Halloween tomorrow?” Max’s voice reached where Cale was lying high on his bunk bed.

Cale leaned over the railing to peer down at him, “I think I might be watching a movie with Emma. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious about how things are going with you two, I hardly see you anymore because you spend all your time with her,” his voice lilted suggestively.

Cale thought about it for a moment. Things with Emma had been good, really good. When she was around he could forget all the heavy things that had been dragging him down. She was so joyful and funny, she could distract him from any and all of his wavering thoughts. Every time they hung out and did homework he felt as though he was just a regular guy.

A guy who had all the time in the world.

“Things are going really well with her actually.”

“Have you told her about your condition yet?” Max sounded quiet, like he was unsure about whether or not he wanted to ask the question at all.

Cale nodded, “Yeah I did.” A lie? Where did that come from?

“Really?” Max seemed surprised, but not as surprised as Cale when those false words came tumbling out.

“Yeah, she was really understanding.” He was digging himself a deeper and deeper hole, but he couldn’t seem to stop.

Well, what were the odds that the two would really interact?

“That’s good, I’m really happy for you Cale, you deserve to find someone who can support you like this.”

But that’s the last thing he wanted, *support*, the word really meant pity. Support meant condescension, and that was one thing that he just couldn’t stand. And he definitely didn’t want

that from Emma. He doesn't want her to see him as weak or failing, or as a man with an expiration date.

Even though that's exactly how he saw himself, like a milk carton with a tilted half blurred date crudely stamped on his head.

So no, he doesn't want to tell Emma anything, she doesn't really need to know, it's not like her knowing would change anything anyway.

"Thanks Max, you know I am really grateful to have you in my life."

"Anything for you Cale, you're my extremely nerdy ride or die"

Cale laughed bringing life back to his ever darkening heart, "If I'm extremely nerdy, what does that make you?"

"Obviously I'm.... ok you know what you make a good point." Max tapped his hand on his desk trying to figure it out. "Okay! I am your extremely nerdy ride or die, and you are my basic nerd ride or die."

"Ah, perfect." Cale said with a sigh.

As he settled back into his soft bed trying to savor the last few moments of the tiny break he was rewarding himself before he got back to reviewing the Krebs Cycle, he continued to convince himself that he was making the right choice.

Emma didn't have to know, and they didn't need to have that painful conversation. No point. This was the correct decision.

But the real reason why Cale wanted to avoid that conversation wasn't for the sake of the girl he was falling for, no. The real reason he refused to talk about his heart condition was because he wanted to feed his ever growing denial that everything would miraculously fix itself. If he kept feeding his perpetuating denial, then he wouldn't have to face the monster of fear hiding in the shadows.

“Cale?”

A soft voice laced with concern caught his attention.

“Yeah?”

The beautiful girl sitting next to him on the couch narrowed her warm gaze in his direction. “Are you ok? You seem really out of it today.”

“Oh yeah, I’m fine, Em.”

“Are you sure? Because I paused the movie 15 minutes ago and you didn’t notice,” she pointed out waving the television remote around.

Damn, he scolded himself, how could he lose himself for so long?

“Oh sorry” he trailed off quietly, not sure how to continue.

Emma pinched her brows together in determination, “Cale talk to me, what’s on your mind?”

He couldn’t tell her the truth, that all that bounced around his head were ticking numbers and crossed out dates, or that his *heart* had an expiration date that was rapidly approaching, that *he* had an expiration date that was rapidly approaching.

With a sideways grin, he ran his hand through his hair, “Sorry, I guess I’m just nervous for the MCAT next Saturday.”

Not a complete lie.

Her eyes widened in understanding, “Oh my god, Cale I’m so sorry, I thought you would like a few hours off to watch a horror movie on Halloween. If you’d rather go study I won’t be offended, this is your *future* we’re talking about. There’s plenty more Halloweens to watch bad horror movies on.”

She smiled sweetly, completely oblivious to the weight of everything she just said. He didn’t have a future, and definitely not ‘plenty more Halloweens.’ But how could she know? It

wasn't like he was telling her anything, but even though he knew deep down that it was his fault for not being honest, he started to feel overwhelmed by everything.

It was all too much.

Too much.

He couldn't do it.

He needed to leave.

Like a rising earthquake, he felt his body shake slightly.

It was getting hard to breathe.

No, no, no.

"You know, I think you're right," his voice shocked him, how could he sound so calm? He was crumbling inside. Internally he was screaming, but then the mess of chaotic words escaped him, "I'm gonna head back."

*What was that?* He bellowed at himself.

Cale felt like he was having an out of body experience, like he was a ghost watching some calm interloper take over his every move. Perhaps this other him was who he wished to be. This person he was watching, looked like him, sounded like him, and moved like him. Except for one small difference.

This doppelganger was normal. A young man with plenty of Halloweens left to live.

Cale quickly grabbed his coat and put on his shoes, "thank you again for having me over, I'll call you."

"You better," she laughed.

Before leaving, he felt time slow as she smiled so warmly in his direction. She was light and happiness and joy. Everything he felt he needed, everything he was missing, everything he wanted to become.



Then, with a nod of his head, he turned and closed the front door behind him, but all he could feel was an overwhelming wave of grief. As he walked down the artificially lit hallway, some of the lights winking out irregularly but struggling to stay on, and passing doors covered in playful decorations, he grieved for a life he wished he had and knew he would never get.

The empty hallway mirrored him, hollow and dimming with each dying bulb.

Each step grew heavier and heavier with the weight of the acceptance of his predicament. And the fear of what he was left with. Leaving behind that dream of a life he had with Emma, because that was all it was, a mirage, his denial personified. She deserved better, so much more than what he had. Or rather what he didn't have: time.

Once he reached outside he decided to walk, he needed some time, and by no means was he actually going to study for his MCAT.

He had lost track of how long he had been walking when he finally landed on an empty bench. The world was bustling, ghosts, goblins, and golems everywhere, but all Cale saw were blurs of life moving around him, like he was sitting in the eye of a storm. He was isolated.

He sat, and he sat, and he sat, while he stared up at the sky, his head resting on the back of the bench. There were no stars that night, just clouds. Dark and shadowy clouds, covering up every hint of light. But he didn't give it a thought because he was breaking.

Not a tear escaped his eyes and not a single sound showed itself. As he sat falling apart. Cale was being consumed. Lost in an infinite sea with no anchor. Inside he raged, a hurricane tore apart those hidden boxes of hope and denial, until they became nothing but empty reminders.

The families and costumed children continued to dance around him, oblivious to the destruction happening right next to them.

He withered, until nothing remained.

## Chapter Seventeen

### *Emma*

Emma had tried to keep her distance from Cale ever since their date failed epically on Halloween. He needed to study for his MCAT, and she refused to get in the way of his future plans, no date was worth that. But even as she resolved herself she had to admit it sucked. She grew so used to having him around, that the past week and a half of radio silence was super difficult. She constantly ended up calling her sister Mira, or Ash to distract herself, which supremely bothered them. Honestly, they might be more relieved that Cale's testing would be over than she was.

The day before his test, she had called his roommate Max and asked about where she could find his testing center.

"Thank you so much!" She had told him.

"Of course, I'm really happy that he has you to support him."

She was confused by what he had said before hanging up, he had sounded so melancholy but also relieved. His tone seemed much heavier than being concerned about his friend's MCAT test. To be honest she had been getting weird vibes from Cale too.

She could tell he was holding something back, but she didn't want to force him to share anything that he wasn't ready to open up about. But after the conversation it seemed that Max was aware of what was going on.

But as much as Emma yearned to know what he was going through she knew he would tell her in time, she would trust him.

So she went and bought a bouquet of flowers and stood in front of the testing center waiting for him to come out. Even if she didn't know what he was going through, she decided she could still support him. And what better way to do that than flowers?

She checked her watch one more time, he should be out any— but before she could finish her thought, the first few people started trickling out.

In a sorry attempt to make sure that she didn't miss him, she shifted and leaned and jumped around completely forgetting that she was, in fact, in a public place surrounded by people with eyes.

She almost gave up on finding him, when the door to the building opened and there he stood. Emma couldn't believe she thought that he would be difficult to notice, he stood out like a sore thumb, walking out of the testing center like he had a spotlight all his own. With a deep breath she stalked toward him, moving awkwardly against the current of escaping students.

“Excuse me, sorry, coming through...” Emma muttered as she desperately tried to make her way toward Cale.

She was starting to get worried that she would miss him, he had begun to move in the other direction as she was just starting to make some headway in her current moves.

Before she could stop to think about it Emma shouted, “Cale!”

Confused about hearing his name he quickly spun around trying to pinpoint the location of the person who yelled.

She decided to heck with it, “Cale! Over here!”

His eyes scanned in her direction until they rested on her and widened in surprise.

“Emma?” He asked incredulously, as he started in her direction.

In a final shove, she made it through the remainders of the crowd to begin closing the distance between the two of them.

He shook his head in shock, “what are you doing here?”

Emma’s palms started to sweat, she couldn’t tell if he was happy, upset, or embarrassed, or maybe a mix of all three.

“Well, I know just how hard you've been working on the MCAT, and so I’ve been keeping my distance to let you prepare. But I figured now that you’ve finished I could see you and bring you a present.” Her cheeks flushed with honesty.

“Wait you...” he trailed off as his eyes drifted down to the bouquet in her hands, “are those for me?”

Emma smiled wide, he sounded so innocent and excited she knew that she made the right choice in coming here.

She nodded, “yeah, I thought that you deserved them, for all your hard work.”

Her hands pushed the lovely mix of yellow daisies and red roses with a touch of baby’s breath in his direction and he accepted joyfully.

“Emma, I- I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s ok you don’t have to say anything, just keep being true to yourself,” she had no idea where that came from, but before she knew it she kept talking, something about being around Cale just brought out the honesty in her.

“Cale, I know that you’re going through something, and I want you to know that it’s ok. It’s okay to struggle, and it’s ok if you don’t want to or aren’t ready to talk about it. I just want you to know that I am here for you, whenever that time comes. No pressure.”

The face of the beautiful boy standing in front of her froze, his eyes were still wide and his mouth was slightly agape. And while her annoying gut was telling her to fill the silence with words and rambling, she didn’t. And instead she leaned forward and stood on her toes to give him a small, feather light kiss on the cheek.

“Text me when you’re ready.”

*Text me when you’re ready*

Two and a half weeks passed since the moment she said those words to Cale after he finished his exam. The first week had passed by quickly enough, she had tests and classes to keep her mind off of him. But then the second week hit.

And that week was brutal.

She really wanted to push him, *oh man*, did she want to push him, to coerce him into sharing whatever he was going through. But she told him that she would wait, so wait Emma did, and it was horrible.

No matter who she was with or where she was all that Emma could think about was the weight of her phone in her pocket, a weight that seemed to increase with every second that passed without a notification. She was going to lose her mind.

Just as her hand started to reach for the still silent phone her door banged open to reveal an excitable Mira poking her head in.

“Emma, come downstairs! Dinner is ready.”

The weekend prior, Emma flew home to Salt Lake City to be with her family for thanksgiving. Tomorrow was the big day and while she was honestly so happy to be with the three of them again, the shadow of a young man with light brown hair and blue eyes was always in the corner of her mind, never leaving her alone.

Maybe she pushed too hard, or maybe she scared him away...

Stop, she commanded herself, she had to relax, or at least try to relax if not for the sake of her own sanity but also so she could enjoy the time that she had with her family.

“Emma!” Mira’s shining voice rang from upstairs.

“Coming!” Emma countered.

Before getting off her bed she decided to grab her phone and put it on do not disturb then slammed it in her nightstand drawer. It was a good hiding spot, out of sight out of mind.

She took a look around her room which hadn't really changed since she moved out to go to college three years ago. It was a good size, not too big but not too small either. She had a twin sized bed against the wall opposite to the door. All her walls were covered with book cases. Some of the shelves had bald spots here and there because of her selection of which books to bring back to Providence with her. Her shelves were also adorned with momentos, photo frames, and knick-knacks. Her Dad always said that it was messy, but she preferred the term 'organized chaos.'

But her favorite part of her room were the origami butterflies that she delicately arranged to form a milky way galaxy pattern around her ceiling light. Sometimes she would catch herself just staring at her ceiling as she laid in bed late at night. Lost in their myriad of colors and the textures in all the folds.

When her family had decided to move to Salt Lake City she had just finished her first year of middle school at the age of thirteen. They had moved plenty of times before, but that move from southern California felt like the last straw. Being thirteen hormones and puberty were already tough enough, mix in some heartbreaking goodbyes and some completely new culture norms and Emma was traumatized. She was tired of letting people get close to her if they would disappear from her life in a year or two. What was the point of letting her guard down and making friends when she would leave them all behind anyway?

The answer she reached was simple.

It wasn't worth it.

Her friends would always say the same things, 'We promise to stay in touch' or 'We will always be friends' and the first few moves she stupidly believed them, every word, and every

empty promise. But when she was thirteen and they were moving from California, one of the most liberal and heavily populated states in the country to an eerily conservative state with snow and thunderstorms, she knew better.

Even before she stepped into their new house, young Emma came to the decision that even if this was where she would live, she would never consider it her *home*. Home had a weight and meaning to it, that she was tired of giving away freely. She had also decided that she didn't need to make any friends either.

Her eighth grade year was cold and empty, nothing had a scent and nothing had any feel to it. She was numb. Places and people blurred together becoming indiscernible from one another. This went on for the entirety of her 13th year.

Nothing mattered.

Until one day things did.

Emma still can't place the exact reason or moment of her shift, but she has never stopped being so grateful for it. Perhaps it was an epiphany that finally allowed her to allow people into her life. Maybe it was more of an animal instinct for survival, that without thinking she started to talk with other people and let them beyond her wall, her shell. She'll never know, but that subtle change provided her with the first stepping stone on her path to joy. Something she hadn't felt in a long time.

Over time she realized that even if people leave your side, and even if they lie and promise to stay with you and break that promise, people would always be worth it. The pain was always worth it. She learned the hard way how difficult it was to be alone, it had almost killed her.

A few weeks after her shift, she began to decorate her room. Starting with art she had found at a local store, and then once again without any explanation, she started making the

origami butterflies. Like she was a woman possessed she folded and folded and folded. And placed them in that spiral galaxy pattern around her light.

And when she stuck that last multicolored butterfly with a relieved sigh, she started to call this house a home.

Every time she looked at her ceiling she was reminded of that journey that she went on seven odd years ago. Every once in a while when she'd catch herself starting to give in to those inklings of giving up on people, she would think about those butterflies, and the strength that they gave her.

As she reached her arm for the light switch while she stood in the doorway she smiled to herself. Maybe she should bring Cale a butterfly.

“Emma!”

Emma laughed, she loved being home, “coming coming.”

She softly flicked the light switch basking the room in shadows, as her feet softly padded away towards the smell of a melty casserole and the sounds of her family's voices ricocheting around the room below.

She didn't hear the vibration of her phone shaking in the drawer that she had tossed it in earlier, shaking with the call she had been waiting for, and lighting her phone with the name she couldn't stop thinking about.

She was blissfully oblivious.



## Chapter Eighteen

### *Cale*

While he took the MCAT he was so out of it. He would read the questions over and over and over again, never fully absorbing the meaning. The letters and words would blur and tilt together. The time flew by slowly but also so unforgivably fast. Once the time ran out he looked down at his bubble sheet only for a completely blank sheet to stare back at him. Taunting him. Laughing at him.

It was all so pointless.

Time ceased to exist as he just sat at the assigned table, perfectly sharpened number two pencil in his perfectly still hand. Nothing happened. To be honest, he didn't even remember taking a single breath the entire time either. All he recalled was walking into the center, going through the motions of checking in, sitting down and then.

And then. Nothing.

After the time was called he packed his unused items, slung his bag over his shoulder, and walked out the door, following the mindless masses, a somnambulist without a map.

He was empty. There was nothing left in him, he just paid hundreds of dollars to take a test that he didn't even bother to fill out. Not even guess answers, or a pattern. Just nothing.

Where was he supposed to go from there? He didn't have a clue.

Before he could lose himself any further a brief note woke him up.

Like an accidental hit on a piano key that disrupts the atmosphere of everything around it, he heard his name. Pulling at him, tugging at him, beckoning him, saving him.

There she was.

She stood among the red, yellow, and green bundle in her arms subtly and painstakingly slowly pouring color back into his black and white world.

Two and a half weeks ago, Emma had brought him flowers and he was paralyzed. When he went off the deep end after their Halloween movie night and stopped talking to her, he figured that she would give up on him. But when he saw her beautiful, intelligent, and brave face waiting for him, he realized that he should have known better. The girl he had grown to care so much for, the girl who wore sweat pants to a school function, the girl who showed him his first march, and the girl who put up with his dumb jokes only to quickly reply with even dumber ones, would never just sit back and give up on someone.

She stepped closer to him, she started talking but he wasn't completely present. At some point the flowers ended up in his arms. He simply nodded along until he heard her say, “—for all your hard work.”

Hard work? He almost burst into heartbreaking laughter. What hard work? He just sat in a room for hours and did nothing. It was humorous how little work he just did. He paid to do absolutely nothing. What was he doing?

“Emma, I don't know what to say.” What was there to say? He couldn't tell her that he just left his answers blank, because then she'd ask why, and then what would he say? He had decided not to tell her anything. So he wouldn't share. He could keep a secret.

“It's ok you don't have to say anything, just keep being true to yourself,” she smiled so kindly. So kind. Why was she so kind? He didn't deserve it, he wanted to scream at her, he was lying, covering up the truth. But he couldn't. Because deep down he was selfish and he didn't want to lose what they had built.

He remained silent as she continued, “Cale, I know that you're going through something, and I want you to know that it's ok. It's okay to struggle, and it's ok if you don't want to or

aren't ready to talk about it. I just want you to know that I am here for you, whenever that time comes. No pressure."

No pressure. No pressure?

Why was her permission so freeing to him? And how did she know? Somehow she had heard his silent pleas. She knew he was hiding something and yet she still wanted to support him. It was so much more than he deserved.

Then she said those five words.

*Text me when you're ready.*

*When you're ready.*

*Ready.*

When would he ever be ready?

Sitting at his kitchen island back in his childhood home his mind returned to where it always did. Everything in his mind came back to time. How much, or rather, how little he had left. And how much, or how little, he could even accomplish in that time.

Ready? He didn't think that he would ever be ready, for anything, not for death, and certainly not for life. Especially not for conversation about death. He wanted to avoid that honest conversation with Emma for as long as possible.

He thought that he was doing something good and right when he stopped talking to her. That he should stop whatever relationship that they had before it got too far, before she would have to grieve him. Isn't that the right thing to do? Isn't it?

"Hey mom?" He called out.

Cale was back home for thanksgiving. He didn't have to travel that far since his parents lived in Providence Oregon, practically a stone's throw away from his college, but it felt like a world away to him. His own little haven, a place to seek comfort, refuge.

His mom was prepping a pie for the next day's dessert just across the kitchen from him. She rolled out the soft pastry and sprinkled flour over the counter when she looked up.

"Yeah?" She answered, her eyes open and inviting.

"You know I don't like to talk about *it*." Cale barely got out.

He didn't have to explain what 'it' was, she knew.

All his mom could do was nod quietly as she slapped her hands together to brush off some of the excess flour, taking a break from her cooking to give her son her full attention.

"Well," he closed his eyes, he knew that he would regret divulging this information, but he was too far now to go back, "I started seeing this girl—" he couldn't finish his sentence before he was cut off by his mother's high pitched squealing.

"A girl?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes a girl—"

"What is she like? How long have you been seeing her? How did you guys meet? Have you been a gentleman? Wait! Why haven't you mentioned her sooner?" He knew that if he didn't put a stop to this soon, her questions would never end.

"Mom," he softly interrupted, watching her intently.

She froze then laughed, "sorry, what were you saying honey?"

"I really really like her, and I keep finding myself pumping the breaks."

"What?" Her eyebrows pinched together.

He placed his head in his hands resting on the cold counter, "isn't it selfish to forge a relationship if it's just going to end," then added, "horribly."

With a sigh his mom answered, "Now let me ask you a question. Is it fair to make that choice *for* her?"

Cale froze, of all the words he expected to come from his mom those were the least expected.

“I know that we were all given a hard reality when we were told that you might live a life shorter than the rest, but even knowing that I might live longer than you, and even knowing that I’ll only get a limited time with you” her voice cracked with emotion as her eyes filled with heavy tears, “even knowing all of that, I know that it's all worth it. All of it.”

Until she stopped talking, Cale hadn’t realized that he started crying listening to her words. He sat still and unflinching while rivers spun down his cheeks pooling beneath him.

“All of it?” he asked.

Placing her life-worn hands on his face to halt the tears, “all of it.”

Before he knew it, his small mother scurried around the island and held him in her open arms. And he sobbed.

His body wracked with emotion, quaking with fear, shattering with grief, and gasping in pain. He sobbed.

“Shhh” his mom hushed him, as she moved her hands in smooth and comforting circles on his back.

And just like that he was a child again, lost in the warm embrace of his mom’s unconditional love.

*Is it fair to make that choice for her?*

He tried to get his mind off it all for a minute as he looked out his window in his room on the first floor of his small family’s mid-century home. But his mother’s words repeated in the echochamber of his mind. He knew that she was right. He was being even more unfair in attempting to make that call for Emma. But the other options were so much more terrifying.

Just the thought of sharing the truth of his condition to Emma made him want to puke. How does someone even start to share that information? He had never really had to tell anyone before. Either they figured it out on their own or someone else did the dirty work for him.

But he knew that he couldn't *not* tell her. That would be cruel and unfair. And to not tell her and give up on their relationship without even trying to work through the hard parts would be cowardly. And boy did Cale hate the idea of being a coward.

So he would tell her.

Eventually.

Yeah.

Cale nodded to himself satisfied with having made a decision without actually taking any real action about said decision. Coming to the conclusion that Future Cale would figure it out.

He was startled awake by a buzz in his hand. Rather ungracefully, Cale struggled to sit up. The clock across the room to his right read *12:15 a.m.* He must have fallen asleep a few hours ago after dinner. His arm was fuzzy with sleep as he readjusted to a more comfortable position on the window sill.

Looking down he noticed the phone in his hand light up again followed by another buzz. The remaining sleep clouded his vision, so he angrily shook his head, trying to escape the tiredness and trying to remember what he had sent Emma earlier.

He racked his brain.

After dinner with his mom and dad he retreated upstairs to reflect...

Oh god.

The phone nearly jumped from his clammy hands when he realized what he sent.

*What would you do if you only had two years to live?*

The voices in his head screamed in regret. He was half asleep already when he sent that.  
What if she questioned him? What if she figured it out?

Slowly his lungs pulled in air, stealing as much from the atmosphere as possible, before his head turned to peer at the cold and unfeeling phone.

He knew he would receive no mercy from the device, but he spun the screen around anyway.

The screen glowed with a large white banner that read, "I'd travel the world."

With a sigh, he unlocked his phone to prepare a response.

A little cliché, but I guess I can give it to you. - **12:20 a.m.**

**12:20 a.m.** - Oh yeah? And what would you do?

With a shaky breath he typed out his answer.

I would be doing exactly what I'm doing right now - **12:21 a.m.**

It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't completely honest either. Baby steps.

**12:21 a.m.** - If you're taking off points for being cliché, then I'm taking off points for a lack of creativity. >\_<

It's only fair - **12:22 a.m.**

**12:22 a.m.** - mhmm

Em, I'm sorry I've been so distant lately - **12:22 a.m.**

**12:23 a.m.** - It's ok

**12:23 a.m.** - It's only fair \*\*smirk\*\*

Em, I'm serious - **12: 23 a.m.**

**12:24 a.m.** - I know

**12: 24 a.m.** - I'm serious too, it's ok

I never really thanked you for bringing me flowers, or for supporting me the way you do - **12:24 a.m.**

**12:25 a.m.** - Is that a thank you??

He could practically hear her voice teasing him, a smile tugged on his lips.

No it wasn't, but when I get back I will show you just how truly grateful I am - **12:25 a.m.**

**12:25 a.m.** - Why Cale, that's mighty forward of you...

Shit get your head out of the gutter Davis, I was trying to be romantic sheesh - **12: 26 a.m.**

**12:26 a.m.** - I know I know, I'm just messing with you

**12:26 a.m.** - I look forward to it

Good, because it is going to be amazing - **12:27 a.m.**

He really needed to stop over hyping these nonexistent plans.

**12:26 a.m.** - Cale

**12: 27 a.m.** - I really like you...

His heart lurched.

He knew how much he cared for her, so much that it had nearly scared him away from her completely. The idea that her feelings were mutual shook him to his very core and made his stomach flash like a thunderstorm, it was exciting and terrifying at the same time.

**12:29 a.m.** - Cale??

Uh oh.



Emma - **12:29 a.m.**

I really like you too - **12:29 a.m.**

And Happy Thanksgiving - **12:30 a.m.**

**12: 31 a.m.** - Happy Thanksgiving Cale

## Chapter Nineteen

### *Emma*

An angry growl sounded from her stomach, even though she was already on her third round of Thanksgiving dinner, and it didn't go unnoticed. Emma peered up at her family with a sheepish grin while her sister Mira stared bug eyed at her from across the table.

"How?" She cried out, just a few moments earlier she had given in to her full stomach capacity after one and a half plates.

All Emma could do was shrug in response, she couldn't explain it but she was never really too full and thanksgiving food was really really good. There was nothing that could stop her.

In the kitchen behind Mira's seat, her Dad, Paul, was listening intently and let out a loud laugh, while her Pops, Alex, smiled from his seat to the right of Mira.

"You should know that nothing can stop your sister's appetite by now Mira," Pops chuckled.

"It's true, I'm unstoppable," Emma said, followed by an evil laugh with a mouth full of mashed potatoes.

"Ew stop it! What would Cale think of you right now?" Mira threatened.

There was an immediate spasm in her chest, she hadn't told her Dads about Cale yet and this wasn't how she was planning on bringing it up. Maybe they didn't hear her.

"I think he would join me in taunting you" Emma calmly responded waving her gravy soaked spoon in her hand in front of her, "as any cool college student would."

That was one of the many things she loved about Cale, she knew that he would back her up even if she was acting completely insane and embarrassing. She almost chuckled imagining

him here teasing Mira with her. It was exciting how clearly she could imagine him blending in with her family. She just knew he would get along with everyone perfectly. He would act so brotherly with Mira, talk sports with Dad, and even watch stupid movies with Pops. He would fit.

“Who’s Cale?” Dad called from the kitchen, shattering all of her daydreams.

For a moment all she could do was gape like a fish, unsure of how she wanted to explain Cale to her parents.

“Well—” she started before a squeaky voice broke through.

“Cale is Emma’s boyfriend” Mira revealed, practically singing the word boyfriend, brutally exacerbating the ‘boy’ in the word.

Emma glared daggers at the evil smirk spreading across her younger sister’s features.

“Is this true?” Pops asked innocently.

This was it.

“I guess?” She started honestly, “We haven’t really defined anything yet,” she trailed off thinking back to the texts they shared the night before, or rather this morning technically speaking.

*I really like you too.*

She was so giddy she practically danced around the dining room table just thinking about it.

“Ah, gotcha” Pops replied, pretending to know what she was saying while clearly not understanding any of it.

But unlike Pops, Dad wasn’t going to let the topic go that easily, “what does that mean?”

She could feel her face cringe at his stern tone, she could tell he wasn’t angry or anything, her Dad was just like that, very macho man and even more blunt.

“It means that we have been dating, but we haven’t put any labels on the relationship yet.”

“How long has this been going on?”

Emma stared down at her half full plate and mumbled, “since early September?”

“Almost three months?” her Dad asked incredulously.

Pops walked around the counter to step behind Dad and placed his arms around his shoulders, “its fine,” he said calmly, “Emma’s telling us now.”

Dad just grumbled as he pushed his seat back and placed his dishes in the sink, Emma could hear him muttering something about *boys* and *can’t trust ‘em*. She smiled to herself. He wasn’t really upset, just scared that she was growing up.

Feeling a pair of eyes on her, Emma turned to see Pops watching her. He had taken Dad’s old seat after he got up and left the table.

“So... tell us all about the lucky guy.”

While she had been adamant to not share too much, once pops made the request the walls came crumbling down. She was overcome with all things Cale.

“Well he’s tall, and really really funny,” and she could feel her sister’s cruel eye roll from across the table. But she continued anyway, “I never realized that I wanted a guy who could make me laugh, but I really do.”

Pops gave her the softest smile, a knowing smile, “I see, well, I’m happy for you Emma.”

He reached his hand across the table diagonally in her direction to grip her hand that was resting by her plate. “I really am.”

Her eyes watered slightly at the warm words, “thanks, me too.”

**Cale**

**10:47 p.m.** - Wanna hear some jokes?

Boy do I! - **10:48 p.m.**

**10:48 p.m.** - While I can definitely hear that offensive sarcasm in your exclamation point, I'm going to continue anyway.

**10:49 p.m.** - Knock Knock

She couldn't help but laugh as she read his texts as she laid in bed. His voice rang through her mind clear as day when she read through his words. She could even imagine his dorky smile as he told them.

So she decided to play along.

Who's there? - **10:49 p.m.**

**10:49 p.m.** - Arthur

Arthur who? - **10:49 p.m.**

**10:50 p.m.** - Arthur any leftovers??

... - **10:50 p.m.**

Try again - **10:50 p.m.**

He was such an idiot, she loved it.

**10:51 p.m.** - alright alright, that was just a warm up round anyway.

**10:51 p.m.** - What kind of key can't open doors?

What? - **10:51 p.m.**

**10:52 p.m.** - A tur-key

A laugh burst from her lungs.

“Shut up!” Her sister bellowed lovingly from below.

You’re such a dork - **10:52 p.m.**

**10:53 p.m.** - But you love me.

Was that an accident? That he sent the L-word? How should she respond? She didn’t want to overstep or make him feel—

No.

Stop over thinking.

She did love him.

Somewhere along the lines, between his casseroles, snow kisses, and absolutely awful thanksgiving themed knock-knock jokes, she really did fall for him.

But this wasn’t something she should text, so she took a chance and called him instead. The phone rang for a half a ring before he picked up.

“Hello?” She could hear his lightheartedness from over the small speakers. His voice soothed her, it sounded like music and waves crashing on a beach. His voice was her favorite sound, and over the phone, late at night, it was just hers.

“I do. I really do,” she paused to build up all her courage, “Cale I love you, so much.”

She’d never felt so free in her entire life.

She was in love.

**De·pres·sion** /dɪˈpreʃən/

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1. feelings of sadness and self rejection, can be used for a chronic mental disorder
2. An economic fall or recession
3. To lower something
4. A dip or impression on the surface of something or someone

## Chapter Twenty

### *Cale*

Ever since the talk he had with his mom about being scared to open up to Emma and to people in general he felt as though a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Maybe he could make it work. Maybe she wouldn't leave.

Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

It wasn't hope exactly, but it wasn't the despair he was feeling before, the despair he was working so hard to smother, was starting to fade away. Slowly, but it was happening.

With his newly developed feelings of ease, Cale made the snap decision to send that text to Emma.

*But you love me.*

He hadn't even paused to consider the consequences in the hope induced high he sent it off without a thought. It scared him when she started calling him but with his new found courage he quickly picked up the phone only to hear her smooth voice, clear as day.

*Cale I love you so much.*

She said it, she went there, he could hear the fearlessness in her voice and the honesty. Emma was certain and she wanted to share that with him. He could almost see her shy smile as she admitted it, with a small challenging glint in her deep brown eyes as if to ask 'what are you gonna do about it.'

Her face was so easily conjured in his mind, it made him question how often he drifted towards her, reaching for her, constantly.

*I love you so much.*



She quickly veered the conversation away from her confession, for some godforsaken reason he said nothing in response to her comment. Why did he remain silent? He would also like to know. Emma curated a more lighthearted talk, asking him where he found his knock knock jokes and more. And Cale was grateful for the segway, while he wanted, *needed*, to respond and let her know his feelings, he knew he needed to do it in person.

So he would have to wait until break was over, and from that moment of realization on, the days dragged by slowly. He almost feared it would never end. But finally when the day came for them to return to their small pocket of the world, where he could see her face in all its ethereal reality

And he would tell her exactly how he was feeling in all its awkwardness. He was going to leap.

When the much anticipated moment arrived, Cale rushed to leave his dorm as soon as he was unpacked. He needed to talk to her and nothing would stop him. So he sprinted to his door, tearing it open with abandon, only, there was someone already standing in his doorway.

Looking down at the short interloper, he was surprised to find the face he most wanted to see already standing right in front of him, with her delicate wrist poised to knock.

“Knock-Knock?” She offered a playful lilt in her voice, shoulders pulling up in a slight shrug.

*She was here, right here.*

“Who’s there?” Cale played along as he leaned into the door frame.

Her cheeks flushed red for a moment then she replied in an exhale, “Ok if I’m being completely honest I don’t have a plan for after that—”

The rambling words were abruptly cut off when Cale smiled and kissed her gently.

Cale leaned back after a moment to see her wide eyes.

“I missed you too.”

Emma tried to look angry but it quickly melted into a grin, “I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but I like it,” as she stood on her tip toes and kissed him back.

This girl, as much as she portrayed confidence and strength, still had moments of shyness and insecurity, and Cale counted himself lucky for being allowed to see those brief moments before she got him back.

“So Cale,” she began her voice soaked with sarcasm, “are you gonna let me in or not?”

His face blanched, he was so focused on the girl standing in front of him he forgot that she was technically standing in the hallway outside his room, coincidentally where all the guys on the swim team could see them and subsequently teased him to no end.

She then leaned in conspiratorially, “I kinda snuck in behind another resident so, if you’re gonna let me in I’d do it now.”

“Hmmm,” he paused, “I’m not sure how safe I’d feel alone with a criminal in my room...”

She laughed, “Ok I guess I’ll head out again.”

He knew he was playing a dangerous game of chicken but he couldn’t help himself.

“Fine, I guess,” he said with the most dramatic sing-songy voice he could.

There was a sparkle in her eyes that shone even brighter than her smile, and right as she opened her mouth to respond a chorus of half the floor shattered their rapport.

“Just let her in already!”

Her hand flew to her face as she smothered a laugh, and Cale moved to the side to let her run in. As soon as she was clear he slammed the door and leaned against it and fell to the ground shaking with laughter as she joined him.

As things started to slow down Cale became hyper aware that there was a beautiful girl in his room. A beautiful girl that loved him, leaning next to him on the floor of his dorm room, laughing joyfully.

Emma sighed and wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes.

“Emma,” Cale said seriously.

Immediately Emma sobered, turning to face him, “yes?”

Her eyes were so wide with wonder and hope, her face warm with energy, and her hair was slightly messed up, some of it now resting on her face. Gently Cale reached over to move a strand of hair behind her ear, lingering just a few moments longer than necessary enjoying the light softness of it.

“I love you too”

There it was.

Out in the open.

Cale looked at the girl sitting next to him, her eyes were wide in surprise, the corners crinkled with relief and happiness.

She brought her arm up and bumped his shoulder lightly, “took you long enough.”

He laughed again, “I thought you deserved to hear the words in person, my bad.”

Following her arm’s lead she rested her head on his shoulder leaning into him, making Cale feel warm. He smiled into her hair, it smelled sweet like roses and fresh rain. Carefully he shifted his arm to cradle her next to his side.

Together they sat.

Leaning on one another.

Counting their breaths, feeling entirely comfortable in the silence.

“Cale?”

“Mm?” he whispered into her hair.

“Tell me about your break.”

He bent his elbow to bring his hand to her hair, playing with it mindlessly, “What do you want to hear?”

“Everything.”

“Everything? Well should I start with the pirate raid? Or my journey to outer space?”

She chuckled, “oh outer space definitely.”

“You see it all started when I got a knock on my door...”

Cale wasn't sure why he didn't answer truthfully, he could have told her about his conversation with his mom, or about his stoic dad. But instead he found himself answering with this overly elaborate story about traveling to space with Elon Musk. Emma laughed, smiled, and played along. Which made that ok, right? If she was having a good time that was all that mattered. He would tell her everything, the *real* everything soon. Just not the night he said he loved her, it would be wrong to ruin the mood.

So the story continued, eventually they moved to his bed, Emma gracefully climbing up to his top bunk, Cale much less so, until they both rested comfortably together. She rested her head in the crook of his neck perfectly, and he loved every second of it.

“Now you have to tell me about your break.”

“I don't know how I'm going to follow up a trip to space.”

“Try me.”

“I've been thinking a lot about picking a major.”

It wasn't too unexpected, he knew Emma had been trying to figure that out, “and?” he asked her, trying not to push her too much. It was really weighing on her not knowing what she wanted to do, and the last thing he wanted to do was add to that pressure.

Even if he was really excited for her, and really wanted to hear what she would choose.

“Well, you know how important my Dads are to me, and I love going to marches like the climate one we went to together.”

Cale nodded.

“The reason I go to marches is because I want to make social change and I felt like that was the best way for me to make that change. But what if I can do more?” She turned her head to stare straight into his eyes.

“I have a sneaking suspicion that you have an answer to that question,” he teased. He could see how her eyes were lighting up. There was a spark there that hadn’t been there before.

“Cale, what if I majored in political science? What if I ran for public office?” She was starting to get a little nervous, some of that new found confidence quickly fading away.

He quickly moved to grab her hands, “I think you would be an amazing public servant. You’re brilliant.” He finished bringing her hands to his mouth and he kissed them softly. “You’ll always have my vote.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Emma, you’re going to make the world a better place, I *know* it.”

“I hope so,” she whispered.

“I’m really proud of you.”

“Thanks Cale,” he looked into her eyes to see them start to spill over with tears, he reached to catch them, “it feels so good to say it out loud. It just feels right. I think this might be what I’m meant to do.”

“You are going to be amazing,” he confirmed again, “President Davis.”

“Woah there cowboy, slow down” she said with an excited giggle, “I was thinking mayor or maybe state legislature.”

But even as she played it down with her words, her eyes brimmed with possibility, her future plans flashed with a world Cale couldn't see, something he hoped so desperately that he might get the chance to see one day.

"You did it."

"Yeah, I did." She smiled so fondly his way that he couldn't help but smile in return.

"So...."

"Yes?" He quirked an eyebrow her way.

"When does Max get back again?"

Cales' heart stopped.

*What?*

She waved her hand in front of his face, "Hello? Cale, did you short circuit?"

Carefully he cleared his throat, "tomorr-row," he managed to answer, but not without a nice voice crack at the end.

"Cale!" Emma exclaimed with bright eyes, "get your head out of the gutter," she laughed.

All he could do was stare her way.

"I was going to ask if you wanted to watch a movie or something, silly," she poked the tip of his extremely red nose with her finger.

Finally he started to feel his brain flowing again, "oh well duh, I don't know what you thought I was thinking, but I was just so excited at the chance to watch all the Star Wars movies in one go."

"Nice one," she smirked.

"Mmmm" was all he said as he leaned over to catch her lips with his own.

"Or we could just stay here" she offered once they broke away.

"You know Davis, I think that is a brilliant idea."

## Chapter Twenty-One

### Emma

*The ground was slippery, sand like, impossible to stay stable. She was running, trying to, clumsily falling and teetering from side to side.*

*She ran and ran and ran.*

*Unsure where she was going but knowing that she just had to keep moving forward.*

*She needed to reach him, he was so close.*

*“Emma!”*

*Quickly her head spun to hear the voice behind her, but the scene shifted, the empty endless desserts fell away, like the grains in an hourglass. To leave only Cale standing in front of her, with nothing but darkness around him.*

*Cale! She tried to call out, but no sound came.*

*“Emma!” He started spinning around, like he couldn’t see her.*

*So she started running again, back to him, she needed to be there in time, he needed her, but the distance didn’t change, until the landscape started to change again, they were standing on the top of a high rise in a nameless city, Cale standing on the edge.*

*Her voice screamed his name, begging him to come back, to see her, but nothing changed. His face was still, resigned, unchanging.*

**REACH**

*The distance finally started to grow smaller, just as he started to fall. The whole world was silent except for the sound of the wind rushing through his hair as gravity started to take*

*him. Emma pushed her arm out to grab a hold of everything in front of her, just a little closer, her feet chasing her arm in a race against fate.*

*He continued to tilt, like the sands of the hourglass, slipping away.*

*Her fingers strained until they finally grasped something soft and real.*

*She caught him.*

*But her feet continued their race, going beyond, to find the finish line, finally surpassing her longing fingers as they pulled him back to the stable rooftop, her toes passed her hand just as they ran right off the edge.*

The light poured into her eyes as they slowly blinked open to the sound of her alarm. Painfully she reached to shut off the blasphemous sound.

A sigh escaped her lips. It was another day, but it felt a little different than the others. This was the first day of class after coming back from break, her first day of class after telling Cale she loved him and he told her he loved her, and her first day back after deciding what path she wanted to take.

She chose political science. Which terrified her. Politics was anything but a secure career field, but she needed to trust herself and allow herself to make this decision. She followed her passion for change and knew that this would allow her to make the world a better place. It was the right path for her.

When she told Cale the day before what she decided, it was her first time voicing her choice out loud, for another person to hear, judge, critique. At first she was scared, what if he laughed at her? But deep down she knew he would be nothing but supportive. When she actually told him though his reaction was even better than she could have imagined. From the look in his



eyes she could see that he really truly believed that this was the right path for her. When he called her ‘President Davis’ she laughed it off, but there was something genuine in his words.

He believed in her.

It was crazy to think how quickly this stranger, a boy with blue eyes and sandy blonde hair, who she happened to fall on at a school event would become so important to her. His thoughts, his opinions, even his dumb jokes, they all started to become a part of her as much as they were a part of him.

She just wished that he could let his guard down more often around her. He had these walls of humor that he uses to keep people away.

It definitely didn’t escape her notice that he quickly offered a few jokes when she asked about his thanksgiving. Patience, patience, patience.

After slowly sitting up in her bed, she scrolled through her phone, taking note of all the notifications she may have missed in the last seven hours. Just a few texts from Ash and Mira. A smile formed on her lips when she read Ash’s latest text: *How did it go?!?!?!?*

*Good :)*

She quickly typed back smirking knowing the lack of information would drive her best friend crazy, especially if the rest of her texts remained ignored for the twenty minutes it would take Emma to shower. Perhaps Cale’s playfulness was rubbing off on her too.

The walk to the bathroom was fast, her feet skipping, and a song humming in her ears.

Everything was looking good.

Everything was definitely not good.

A less than happy looking Ash was standing outside the building Emma just walked out of. She was wearing a blue shirt with a crying planet earth in the center of it with brown

corduroy pants and a knee length dark brown coat. Her eyebrows were drawn in concentration, and her toes hopping with impatience.

“Hey girly” Emma offered as she closed the distance between them.

Her nose scrunched up like she smelled something bad and Emma started to get nervous, maybe her Cale inspired tease was a really bad choice, she mentally cursed in Cale’s direction.

“Look—” she tried to start before being abruptly cut off by an excited squeal.

Ash reached out and pulled Emma into a hug.

“Emma! You have to tell me everything!”

Looking up at her friend Emma smiled, she was really looking forward to telling Ash all about her boy.

Emma squealed back and gripped her friend’s arms as she hopped up and down before being joined by that same friend.

The funniest part of the whole interaction of the two best friends screaming while jumping up and down was the fact that none of the other college students passing them by paid them any mind. Just moving to the side to rush to their next class.

“What are you doing right now?” Emma asked.

“Absolutely nothing,” Ash replied with gusto.

“Same here.”

The two shared a maniacal grin before saying at the same time, “Tacos!”

Emma grabbed her car keys out of her pocket swinging them around her index finger, “I’ll drive.”

Ash clapped excitedly, hooking her arm through Emma’s, “I missed you.”

“I missed *you*, I know it was only a few days but I needed you, you’re my number one,” Emma paused before adding, “that is if you haven’t replaced me with my sister yet.”

Ash scoffed, “She could never replace you, granted she has more of a social life than you, better fashion sense, and not to mention great taste in movies...”

“I was kidding but now I’m actually worried,” Emma lamented.

Ash laughed, “don’t worry, mini Davis has nothing on the original, you’re a classic.”

Five tacos, two cups of guac, and a really bad case of halitosis later, Emma and Ash sat at their table laughing animatedly. The restaurant was quiet given that it was 2 pm on a Monday afternoon, but that never stopped Ash and Emma. Soon after they first met they discovered a quiet hole-in-the-wall taqueria hidden a block or two off of the main street downtown, it had become their go to spot. A place with amazing food and a relaxed atmosphere where they could always come and just be themselves, not that either girl ever felt the need to hide their true selves from anyone, but it was nice none-the-less.

“Mira said that?” Ash exclaimed.

Emma nodded, “yeah she wants me to start sending her postcards, but and I quote ‘only the ugliest ones you can find.’ So I guess I’ll try, but I doubt there are too many ugly cards out there.”

“I have a feeling you’d be surprised.”

Emma sighed.

“Ash,” she began with a fresh tone of seriousness, “I think I’m going to be a political science major.”

Ash just stared across the table at first before her face lit up with excitement, “Oh my god! Now I, the amazing environmentalist that I am, will have a friend on the inside! This is perfect.”

Ash reached out and grabbed Emma’s hand, “Em, this feels so right. Why didn’t we see this sooner?”

“I know right? I feel the same way, like it was just so obvious. I think I can actually change the world this way,” with a shy blush she admitted, “Ash your passion for change really inspired me too. I think you really helped me figure it out.”

“Aw Em, we are going to be such a power duo, making the world a better place. Me on the outside, you on the inside, not to mention your hot doctor man.”

She waved her hand in front of her face to brush her off, “Ash don’t get too ahead of yourself. I put myself out there, and he reciprocated, but I just can’t shake the feeling that something’s wrong. Like it’s been *too* easy and I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

Ash leveled her gaze, “let me stop you right there,” she picked up a tortilla chip holding up an ungodly amount of guacamole and pointed it in Emma’s direction, “No. Self. Sabotaging.”

“I’m not self sabotaging...” Emma started but then she realized maybe that was what she was doing, perhaps it wasn’t Cale driving a wedge between them but actually *her*? “Oh god, you might be right. That is something I would do, isn’t it?”

“Completely, so just let yourself be happy.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Cheers girly,” then together they clinked their virgin margaritas, “to a good future!”

“And being happy,” Emma added.

The drink was cold, and gave her goosebumps as it slid down her throat, leaving a sickly sweet residue behind on her tongue. She would have to pace herself or she would never be able to finish the whole thing. Slowly she set the heavy glass down, and felt freed from the weight as soon as it rested away from her.

Happiness, that’s right. Love and companionship, a plan for the future. That’s everything, so why did things still feel so off?

Mira,

I still don't know why you insist that I send you these postcards when I could call you anytime you want? And to top that the "ugliest one I could find?" well I hope you enjoy this card featuring the Providence City mascot, the ever so glorious Humboldt's Flying Squirrel. To be honest the face it's making scares me more than I'd care to admit. When I picked it out, Cale happened to be with me and he thought I was insane, but then I explained how it was for you and he completely understood.

And yes things are going well with Cale. I shouldn't have told you that I felt like he was hiding something while I was home because now your head is filled with all the wrong ideas. No he's not having an "illicit affair" where did you even learn that term, what is that high school teaching you?

I still think he's going through something, but I have a feeling he'll tell me soon. I trust him. And if my lack of patience ever gets the better of me I could always interrogate his roommate.... No I won't do that. But I could....

Anyway Mira, it's good to hear how Dad and Pops are doing good, and I am proud of you for working so hard in school. I know staying inside and staring at boards and reading all day aren't for you, but you just have two more years and then you can do whatever you want!

I look forward to your answer, I fully expect to receive an even more 'unique' postcard from you in return. (But good luck beating the demented flying squirrel).

Love,

Emma

## Chapter Twenty-Two

*Cale*

12 - 05 - 19

Cale Martin

This is the third and final reminder that you are due to schedule an appointment with your cardiologist. If you do not keep up with the proper monthly appointments you could potentially be moved down or even removed from the donor list entirely for not taking proper care of yourself before a potential transplant.

Your records show that your primary cardiologist is Dr. Wood of Providence Central Hospital located at 845 E Moroe Street. We recommend that you contact them directly if you wish to maintain your spot on the donor list. If you continue to miss your scheduled appointments you will face dire and regrettable consequences.

Sincerely,

The Oregon Department of the Health Resources and Services Administration

“Emma?” he screeched from the couch in her living room.

“What is it?” an exasperated voice answered from the kitchen across the space.

“There’s another one!”

“Seriously? Ok one second, keep your eye on it.”

The pill-bottle-lid-sized spider clung to the wall, clumsily scaling the cold gray surface.

Cale kept his distance, those things could jump for all he knew and he wasn’t going to take any

chances. One of its grotesque legs slipped, giving him a heart attack. If the brown body fell into the murky carpet there would be no catching it.

“EMMA”

“I’m coming, I’m coming” the voice grew closer as her footsteps flew across the floor.

After what felt like ages, his warrior girlfriend appeared with her weapon of choice, a bug catcher typically used by children who wanted to catch bugs for fun that had a retractable bottom. “Okay, where is it?”

“Right there,” Cale turned back to the wall, a now very spider *free* wall.

“Shit,” he muttered, desperately looking all over his body to make sure it wasn’t on him.

“Aha!”

Following his ears, Cale turned to his right to see Emma with the catcher over the large spider a few feet away on the wall. Damn they move fast. Delicately she closed the bottom of the case with the slider on the handle.

“Got him,” she smiled proudly before sauntering over and asking, “wanna see?”

With a sudden rush of adrenaline he launched yards back from his evil girlfriend.

“Oh hell no.”

She laughed, “I know, I’ll be right back, I’m gonna set this guy outside.”

Cale nodded dumbly, he was still shaken up by the whole thing. That was the fifth spider this week, actually it was the fifth spider that they *caught* this week. Who knows how many more could have gotten away. A shiver raced up his spine.

“Ok, spider is gone,” her voice called as she closed her front door behind her.

“Emma you know I love you, but this spider infested apartment might be a deal breaker.”



With a shake of her head she approached him, “I’m just surprised that you’re so scared of them, I would have never pegged you for an arachnophobe.” She poked him in the side as she sat next to him.

“I’m more surprised that you aren’t scared of them,” Cale would never admit it, but he actually really loved seeing that fearless side of Emma, even if it was mildly emasculating.

“When you live in an apartment filled with them you face your fears pretty quick.”

“Did you ever consider moving?” he asked genuinely.

Her eyes twinkled competitively, “and let the spiders win? I don’t think so.”

He sighed, of course she turned this into a fight about honor and pride, against *spiders*, “you know I don’t think the spiders would hold it against you if you gave in.”

“But don’t you see? I would know Cale, *I* would know,” she said dramatically leaning against him, teasing him with her warmth.

“You are a wonder,” he whispered.

“I’m choosing to take that as a compliment.”

He chuckled, “as you should.”

“I’ll always protect you,” she said as she tilted her head onto his shoulder, “even from harmless and defenseless spiders.”

While he was coming up with a witty comeback for her, he realized something.

He really liked the sound of “always.”

Always.

Perhaps he should have been scared of that sort of commitment, but instead he savored the word, protecting it like a spark from a cold blizzard, he wouldn’t let that ember burn out.

“You ready for finals?” Max asked Cale as they both sat at their prospective desks working.

Cale spun around in his chair, “what do you think?” gesturing to his mess of sticky notes, papers, and books.

“Yikes,” Max said while trying to hide his completely organized and clear study surface.

“How many finals do you have?” the pre-med student asked, in an attempt to change the subject from his less than acceptable study conditions.

His friend smiled, “only six.”

“Good lord Max, how are you still alive?”

“You know,” he started pensively, “I can’t even tell you that. But I’ve decided to accept it. What about you?”

“I have four finals, all cumulative, and a lot of memorization. I don’t think there are enough flashcards in the whole world.”

Max’s face scrunched in pain, “I’m lucky that mine are short answers, I don’t really have to memorize a lot of stuff. You’ve got it rough.”

“Tell me about it,” Cale sighed, leaning back against his seat and closing his eyes.

Why put up with so much work? It might all be for nothing anyway. Already didn’t do the MCAT properly. Maybe a break is due, perhaps some nice time off. He could easily just hop on a plane and go anywh—

“How are Emma’s finals?”

At the sound of her name, his eyes immediately snapped open.

“She’s doing amazing, a bunch of essays, which she’s been working on weeks in advance. Typical,” he tried to sound annoyed but couldn’t stop from smiling at the thought of her face when he had asked her about finals himself the day before. She was so hard at work, and ahead of the game yet she was just a little bit frazzled still.

Her hair was a mess but still beautiful when she outlined her finals game plan for him, “I’m almost finished with them, I just have two more drafts to finalize.”

She had spoken so casually, like it wasn’t a big deal. And maybe to her it wasn’t, but it blew him away. Ever since he saw her, really *saw* her at the march they went to, he always knew she’d be something great, she would do amazing things, world changing, earth shattering, record breaking things. And she would do them all with that same attitude, treating it like it wasn’t anything out of the ordinary, she just saw herself as doing whatever she needed to do. But it was so much more than that.

She inspired Cale, and as he reflected on the way she smiled softly when she so lightly, so delicately, left him speechless, he realized that if he wanted to be anything like her, a person who always sees the good in people, a person who would just *do* what’s right without a second a thought, a person who could just shine, then he could study for his exams. If he could channel even the smallest likeness to her, then he was sure he could do anything.

A laugh woke him from his reminiscing, he leaned to face his roommate again, who was now laughing loudly, “what?”

“Sorry, it’s just your whole face changed when you were thinking about her. I just couldn’t believe that the downer, perpetual emo boy, would look so” he stuttered trying to come up with the word, “so content.”

“Ha ha,” he forced his face into a stern frown, but cracked in no time at all, “I can’t believe it either.”

“Whipped,” Max teased.

“Hey!”

Soon the two were both laughing, “next time we play Mario Kart, I’m so kicking your ass,” Cale threatened.

“You’re so on” Max accepted.

“But finals first,” he ruled, he had a new standard for himself. He aspired to be more like Emma, and that required a greater work ethic. Maybe he should start by organizing his desk...

The time on the clocks continued to tick forward, the theoretical physics major quietly worked through one of his many text books, and the struggling future doctor decided to keep struggling as he threw out trash and sorted his notes, one shaky footing at a time.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### *Emma*

“Are you 100% sure that you want to study with me and my place?” Emma asked on the phone earlier that day. Finals week was abruptly coming to a close and Cale told Emma that he wanted to come work at her apartment. She was unsure, not that she didn’t want to be with him, but what if he couldn’t focus with her there? But he insisted.

“Yeah of course! I haven’t seen you at all this week—”

“Yes and that’s because we all needed to focus.”

“Come on Emma, I know what I can handle, let me come visit please?”

And she just couldn’t say no to that voice, she could practically see those blue eyes wide and filled with emotion.

That was what led to him showing up at her door, hair a tangled mess, buttons on what would have been a very nice dress shirt all buttoned wrong, and shoes with no socks. He wore a toothy grin on his face, which did nothing to mask the bags under his eyes, when she greeted him.

“Hey Em, thank you for letting me come study with you today,” he kicked off his sneakers leaving them by the door as he walked in.

Emma stepped aside for him, “as long as you’re sure that I won’t distract you, I know that you’re applying to Medical School too, I would hate to get in your way.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he shook his head and waved her off.

She gave him a skeptical look, “alright,” she didn’t quite believe him, but he was almost as stubborn as she was so she definitely wasn’t going to keep fighting on it, she was familiar with the concept of mutually assured destruction.

In an attempt to get her mind away from her frustration she asked, “What are you working on today?”

He reached his hand to the back of his head and looked down at the floor, “anatomy.”

“No need to sound so heartbroken,” she teased, “how are you planning on studying?” she continued as they made their way to their familiar spots in the living room.

Over time, and through Cale’s frequent visits, they had established a level of normalcy. He always sat on the couch closer to the hallway and front door, when she asked him about it once he said that it just felt right, but she couldn’t help but notice how his eyes kept drifting towards the door, like a person on their first plane ride after the flight attendants point out all the exits.

*Keep in mind the nearest exit may be behind you.*

“Since it’s mostly memorization, I’m going to read through some flashcards, maybe draw some models. I’ll see how I feel.”

“I’m so glad that I’m not in the sciences, I just can’t do memorization like that.”

And then he laughed.

Emma’s face burned, “what’s so funny?”

His face sobered, “Em, you can do anything.”

And like the impossible Emma was sure her face burned even brighter, “you give me too much credit.”

“I don’t think you give yourself enough,” he winked, bringing back his more typical playful energy.

Then for a moment, they just smiled in each others directions. And despite the cold winter atmosphere that lived all around them, they felt warm.

This was right.

It felt as though with a satisfying click all the pieces fell into place.

Any anger Emma was feeling about Cale not properly preparing for his finals melted away, because they were together, and something intangible between them made everything feel okay. Like it would all work out.

Perhaps he knew that *that* was the feeling waiting for him when he would arrive.

He knew, just as he always did, that once they were brought together, everything would be ok, and Emma was just beginning to figure that out for herself.

“Let's get started then,” she stated.

“Perfect.”

And for a few hours it was.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### *Cale*

There's nothing more jarring to Cale than losing time. He always took pride in his memories and being able to recall events and moments perfectly. Granted there are always those moments when he misplaced his keys, or phone, or even that one sock. Sometimes even forgetting why he walked into a room. He would march in a direction, so sure, with much intent, only to lose all of it with a single blink.

*Why am I here again?*

*What was I looking for?*

Even dreams are forgotten, no matter how sure in the moment he wanted to believe the opposite to be true. Maintaining that this time, *this time*, will be different.

It never is though.

He would move on after. Eventually forgetting his forgetfulness in the ultimate act of paradox.

But typically he doesn't completely lose time and place.

Unless he found himself to be in one place one moment and then be somewhere else in an instant.

Or rather what feels like an instant, because time doesn't just disappear.

As much as he would like to believe that the world ceases turning as soon as he does, it doesn't.

So rather than forgetting what was forgotten, some he struggled to fill the pieces of what he might have missed. Desperately trying to figure out what went wrong and when and where it happened.



Cale was in just such a predicament.

When his eyes finally struggled open, he was met with bright lights and hushed voices. The voices attached themselves to blurry bodies hanging above him.

“No”

The first words he heard, the first sound he recognized.

It was so brief, soft, and indescribably sad.

Heartbroken.

That voice was also one he recognized, a kind voice, a voice he never heard so shattered. It was a voice usually lit up with the life of laughter.

Ah, there it was, a smile, so clear in his mind’s eye. He remembered thinking about how her teeth were so white. It was unfair. Like she needed one more thing to hold over the rest of them.

That smile, the glistening smile, a smile he longed to see always, was where that voice was coming from, but this familiar smiling voice, he could tell, was missing a smile. It sounded so blasphemously incorrect.

In a fast attempt to sit up all he did was tense some muscles and see stars.

Stars, oh how he wanted to reach for their light, rather than drown in the inky depths that surrounded them. They always appeared so easy to grab, making him forget how close they were to falling into nothing. Perhaps he wasn’t meant to reach those stars. Maybe it was a futile fight.

His head rushed, filling his mind with cotton. A wall formed between his consciousness and his senses. He could feel and he could think yet there was a persistent third party attempting to divide them.

There was a softness that brushed across his feet and he knew that was *him*, however, that membrane of his mind prevented him from really *feeling* anything.

“Emma I’m sorry, I thought he told you.”

A new voice poured into his clouded ears. It was just as familiar as the first one, but more masculine.

Max.

His best friend.

And he was talking to Emma.

Emma.

Why are they talking?

Who didn’t tell Emma something?

Wait.

Oh no.

No no no.

A gasp danced from his lips as he finally sat up.

He remembered. All of it. He was teasing Emma about how she always put her hair up, then took it out again, only to put it back up a few moments later. Over and over and over, she looked so confused, she had no idea that she did that, her body operating completely on its own, almost in ritual with itself. Then the face she made when he told her that he found it endearing, priceless.

They finished their studying for the night, and it was late, Emma insisted on walking him up to his room from her car ‘for his own safety.’ She laughed but it rang hollow, as she said that he should get some sleep, because ‘he didn’t look too good.’ She again attempted to sound lighthearted, but she was never any good at hiding her feelings.

They walked together. Slowly turning up the stairs to get to the second floor where his dorm lived peacefully. That was when he started to feel it.

The dizziness. Was he tilting or the room? He couldn't be certain.

One step, one foot, he was so close.

When they reached his door, he hadn't even noticed for a few moments. Her voice echoed toward him in alarm, calling his name softly, asking if he was ok.

He definitely wasn't, but he wasn't going to say anything. He searched his pockets for his keys desperately trying to make the time go by faster, to escape, to avoid. To pretend.

Once he had his keys in his hand he reached his hand for the handle, but it kept getting further away from him. No matter how far he reached it would never close the space to the lock.

Then she called his name again, but all he could think about was how heavy the keys felt in his hand, had they always been so heavy? Maybe he was weaker.

Strange.

Then it all went black, except for a single star, shining in all the darkness, calling his name. But no matter how he tried to join the light, the inky blackness beat him to it, swallowing him whole until there was no light left.

He remembered all of it.

The surface he was on quietly squeaked in response to his abrupt awakening as he sat up.

"Cale?" A watery voice asked.

His neck spun to find the broken voice to his left. The first thing he noticed were the tears streaming down her unsmiling face. Immediately, he tried to discover the source of the tears and saw his small roommate Max sitting across from her looking at the ground instead of meeting his eyes. He was about to jump up and confront Max when it came again, that heart wrenching sound.

"Is it true? Are you dying?"

Everything froze.

There wasn't a single sound.

This was it.

The moment he was dreading for so long.

The look of pity he had been avoiding.

It was here.

"Max," his voice came out scratchy and cracked with fear, "did tell her?"

His friend continued to sit, looking at his feet. Slowly his lip started to tremble almost as if even his mouth was conflicted about how to answer, so his body made the decision for him as his head slowly nodded.

Air steamed from Cale's mouth, he felt unsure of how he wanted to continue. In all honesty, he didn't want to continue, he wanted to press pause and rewind. Like after the end of an old VHS tape, just click back and start over.

He wanted to avoid it.

"Cale?" her voice sang again. He turned to see her face, similarly to Max, her face was contorted in a limbo, ready to fall apart but also holding out for that hope that it was all a misunderstanding. It was a look he knew well.

"Yes," he whispered, "I'm dying."

With those three words, it felt as if he was learning his truth for the first time too.

And with that she let her face crumble.

And the tears fell. Hers and his.

Her mouth gaped, but no sound came out. It looked like she was screaming but someone turned the settings to silent. A ghostly phantom. Somehow, it hurt more that way.

Carefully he tried to stand up off the bed, it was Max's bed, he wasn't sure how exactly he ended up there, but he assumed that they couldn't very well move him to the top of his lofted

bunk, so they settled with Max's bed instead. With a glance, he noticed that the time read 3:28 in the morning.

The weight of everything came crashing down on him and with the dizziness that hadn't yet faded he ended up falling back into the bed.

Emma took notice of his clumsiness and immediately froze.

"Cale, you need to rest," she said wobbly.

He shook his head, "No, we need to talk."

She closed her eyes, keeping them tight, and took a few breaths, "alright, but you need to drink some water first and stay where you are, I'll bring it to you."

Max was already reaching for a water bottle from Cale's desk and handed it to her, she took the container gratefully and headed out to the hall.

After the door shut quietly, he once again looked to his roommate and waited.

The friend took a shaky breath before he said, "You just collapsed Cale," he paused, finally looking up to meet his gaze, "without a word, you were out."

He wring his hands as he struggled to continue the story, "I had just finished my cramming for the night when I heard her, she was screaming your name. But you weren't answering. I'll never forget the moment I opened that door to see you sprawled on the ground and her face when you weren't responding. Everytime I close my eyes, it's what I see."

This time it was Cale's turn to stare at his feet.

He had two, and ten toes, five per foot.

"Cale, I thought you told her about your— your" he grasped for the word, "condition. But she had no idea. Luckily you were just exhausted. Your heart was still beating, it was fast, but regular, and you were breathing. But for a few moments I thought that was it."

“Cale, you need to take care of yourself, and you need to be honest. You can’t run away from this anymore.”

Finally he nodded.

“Max, what does she know?”

He sighed, “she knows that you have congenital heart disease, she knows that you’re waiting on a transplant, and that if you don’t get a transplant in less than two years then...” he left it at that, allowing the silence to swallow up the truth. Ironic from a friend who urges him to face up to the truth.

There was a tentative knock at the door.

*Emma.*

“You ready?” a faraway voice asked.

Slowly he nodded.

Max took his cue and stood up for the door, he couldn’t quite make out what they were saying, it all buzzed together like he was underwater.

She nodded looking at the ground, and Max gave her a small pat on the arm before he took his leave.

Where was he even staying? Isn’t that something he should know? Why didn’t he ask? But then he was gone, and he was alone with her. The room around him felt like it was shrinking, constricting him, and closing him in, leaving him no room to move, no room to breathe.

ba-thump.

He found himself once again trying to find a way to escape.

ba-thump.

ba-thump.

He couldn’t move. He was stuck.

ba-thump.

ba-thump.

BA-THUMP.

“Cale!”

The air was shaking around him, no, that was him shaking. He gasped for breath as the sound around him slowly returned. In front of him was Emma. But it was an Emma he’d never seen before. The Emma he knew, *his* Emma, was never scared, always brave. Her golden frizzy hair was the same. And while her eyes were the same shape, the same brown, there was something else. Something alien.

Fear.

Unmistakable fear.

“Cale,” she started again, but softer now that she had his attention, “I brought you some water.”

Without noticing or feeling anything, he watched as his hand gripped the bottle tightly and held it in his hands.

“Cale, you’re supposed to drink the water dummy,” that was closer to his Emma, but it fell flat without the playful shaking of her head, and no laughter to follow.

“Right” he responded nervously. The tip reached his mouth, he hadn’t realized how thirsty he was until that moment. He nearly drank the whole bottle in one go.

“What was the last thing you ate?”

“Wel—” *when was the last time he ate?* He couldn’t remember. Oh...

She smiled softly, “thought so,” but she didn’t sound proud, there wasn’t a single hint of ‘I told you so.’ Just sadness.

The moment grew nearer.

The small talk ended.

Should he say something? He figured that he should, but he couldn't get the words out, as if his throat was refusing to let the words pass.

Thankfully Emma spoke first, "I just don't understand why you wouldn't tell me?"

He couldn't even admit it to himself, how was he ever supposed to admit it to the girl he loved? He wanted her to see him as strong and funny. Capable. The truth was far from that.

She seemed so broken. So not Emma.

"Em, it wasn't you—"

She leveled a glare in his direction, a glare that seemed to say, *finish that phrase I dare you.*

He cleared his throat, "I- I just" how is he supposed to talk to her about this? Even he wasn't sure how he felt about it all, "um I just didn't think it was that big of a deal."

Across from him she flinched. Like the words themselves had hurt her.

"Not that big of a deal," she muttered darkly before facing him again, "What part of your life isn't a big deal?"

"There's nothing I can do, it just doesn't matter." He had never really voiced these thoughts out loud before, it felt strange, uncomfortable.

She dropped her head into her hands, "how can I convince you that it *does*? That you matter? How," he voice broke off with a crack, "can I help you?"

He was taken aback by those words, how can she help? It's simple, she can't. There's nothing she or anyone else can do to help him. Nothing.

"You can't." He whispered.

"Cale—"



“No! Don’t you see, this is why I didn’t want to say anything, it’s just causing you pain. It doesn’t matter. Now we can’t go back. You know now, and you’ll never see me the same way.”

She peered up again with tears in her eyes.

Pity.

He was starting to lose it, “I can’t pretend anymore.”

“When were we pretending?” She asked, like she was waiting for an answer that she knew she would never receive. Her body stilled, bracing for impact.

He felt his head tilt to the side, “I am always pretending.”

Wet, the taste of salt assaulted his tongue. *Oh.*

“Do you even care?” There it was, the shift he was waiting for, no longer soft, no longer holding out for the hope that this would all turn out to be an elaborate prank. Her voice tinged with anger and frustration, like a teapot that was about to whistle.

“Of course, I cared—”

“What did you think we were doing all this time?” She screamed, “That we were playing house?” *yes.* “That I was some sort of escape?” *yes.* “Was any of it real to you?”

“Yes!”

His face felt wet, and it continued to pour. Like a knocked over cup, with water that continued to fall off the table, forming a lake upon the ground below. Falling, with no one trying to fix it. Soon it would be empty.

“Then why didn’t you tell me? Why?” Her voice bellowed.

“Because I don’t want to think about it! Because I don’t want to care!” it was freeing. The first because started his release, and he worried he would never stop. His voice raged, growing louder with every word, every syllable. “Because it doesn’t really matter! Because I don’t matter! You might have decades, hell even a century left, but I’m a blip. It doesn’t matter,

none of it matters! I don't matter!" He was gasping for air, his hand landed on his chest gripping his plain shirt tight.

He didn't want this.

He remembers thinking about how soft it was. That was the last thought he had before the beginning of the end.

"Cale," she began roughly, her own voice being torn to shreds by her own violent tears, "Cale, you do matter. It all matters."

He shook his head and waved her away as she tried to reach out to him, "stop, you don't understand. You will never understand."

And a feat he thought wouldn't be possible, both their tears poured faster, blurring their vision, and contorting the truth, "How can I help you understand how important you are? To me, to your friends, to your family? To the world? How can I—"

"You can't"

"But..."

"You can't, just let it go."

Her lips wavered, "Cale I can't just watch you self destruct like this."

He took a shaky breath, "then leave."

The yelling that had filled the air just moments before felt so long ago, so foreign from the weighted silence that surrounded them now.

"I love you," she said it so hollowly, so far from the first time she said those words to him over the phone. When she was excited, hopeful, and happy. Now she seemed utterly destroyed. And it was because of him. He did that to her.

That was the last thing she said to him before she stepped outside, her feet padding away. Cale laid on Max's bed for so long, straining his ears trying to find those footsteps he hadn't

noticed when the sun had finally begun to rise again, exposing all the shadows that the night had tried so desperately to hide.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

### *Emma*

It wasn't until three days after her confrontation with Cale that her eyes ceased being a puffy mess. He needed help. He needed support. And oh boy did she want to be that person. But deep down even she recognized that this was a journey that only he could dictate. Whether he accepted his reality or not was entirely up to him. No words on her part were going to change that, no matter how much she wished it to be true. It just hurt that she didn't realize just how much he was going through.

Of course she knew that he had a secret. But to think that their entire time together he was secretly counting down. Though, thinking back, he didn't say he was pretending so perhaps he wasn't thinking that way at all when they were together.

Afterall, she was a distraction.

The Cale she saw that night, with tears, a shattered voice, and no hope, seemed so unlike her Cale. He was always so witty and laughing whenever they were together. It was truly unsettling to think that maybe that wasn't even him? Just a mirage of what he imagined happiness to look like, all the while he was hollowed out and drying up like a flower in a pot with not enough water.

Was the light hearted boy she fell in love with real?

She knew the answer, but held on to the question, not wanting to face the truth she so wholeheartedly feared.

Like Orpheus, she knew she shouldn't look back. To peer over her shoulder would mean losing everything that she thought she had. But did she even have it? Was it ever hers? She had no faith that the man she loved that smiled behind her was ever really there.

Her neck kept turning, her eyes slowly looked, and her mind continued to make the connections. With each one, a piece of him disappeared, replaced with a grotesque version, leaving a patchwork vision.

His smile replaced with a gruesome grimace.

The light in his blue eyes replaced with empty dead orbs.

Which one was real? Were both? Were neither?

She didn't know.

He was fading away, so quickly, she couldn't hold on.

Perhaps even he didn't know either. Her thoughts were often plagued with those tangents of 'but Cale is just as lost' if not more so.

What was the right thing to do? She wanted to give him space, but what if he needed to be loved?

Was it even her place to think? Too long? To wish that she could be the one to help him?

A buzz to her left broke her out of her thinking. She groaned as she remembered that the rest of the world still existed. She finished her finals long before her fight with Cale. She started to fondly recall how he teased her about being over prepared, but then the smile that had formed on instinct, laced with pure nostalgia, fell when the reality of their world hit her again.

She threw her arm over to her night stand to grip her phone. She saw a screen full of notifications. Mostly her family group chat excited for her to come back home for winter break. She allowed herself a smile at that. Maybe her family could help her figure out what she needed to do. The distance was sure to be helpful as well.

Her phone also revealed two missed calls from Ash. She still hadn't told her friend about Cale. Probably since telling another person would make the situation all the more real and the

fact that he was dying all the more dire. Feelings she was desperately trying to avoid. That was probably exactly how Cale felt, only he experienced those feelings ten, no— hundred fold.

*But how can he say it didn't matter? That nothing matters? He matters.*

And her phone started buzzing again, Ash. She was faced with a decision, to answer and face the facts or ignore and continue this limbo. Oh, it was so tempting to ignore, her finger hovered over that bright red phone icon for far too long, so close, yet she couldn't bring herself to drop the ax. Because how could she be mad at Cale for hiding his pain or for avoiding the truth if she didn't face it herself?

There were two things Emma refused to be: a hypocrite and a coward. And pushing the angry button would make her both. So in a split second decision she clicked the green. Choosing the scary path, the road that would hopefully lead her to him, the path that might have potentially led her to the wisdom she needed to help him find his own way.

“Emma?” Ash's voice rang across the tiny speakers, she sounded distressed.

“Emma?” She repeated growing in concern.

She knew that she should answer, but the words were caught in her throat, unable to be released. Instead they took another form. She wailed.

“Oh no Emma, shh... shh...I'll be right over,” the crying grew louder, “Don't worry, I'm going to leave my phone on, I'm right here. Let it out.”

And she did, and she did, and she did.

Some of the most ugly sounds she had ever heard jumped from her mouth, rearing their ugly heads and their selfish scents.

She didn't have any thoughts once her shadows flew from her lungs. It was just noise and emptiness. Why did she even feel this way? Maybe it wasn't that she didn't have any thoughts, but rather too many. Her mind had so much happening that it resounded in this white blankness.

Never in her life had Emma ever felt so lost, she was grieving. For what she wasn't certain. For a lost love? For a love that never existed? For an innocent boy's imminent death? For a person she never knew? What did she even feel?

There was no name, but nonetheless it was there, a nameless creature with a tragic painful voice.

The sounds that came from her, the guttural grief that filled up the space surrounding her stole any other senses from her mind. There was no sensation but of the screaming, the creaking of her mind coming to a halt, the tearing of her muscles, the screeching of the colors of her surroundings leaching away.

It was all too much.

And she had no idea what to do with it.

She was after all just one person.

Ash appeared at her apartment ten minutes after their call. A time that, when looking back, should have been impossible given their distances, but when loved ones are in trouble traffic laws seem trivial to many.

To Emma, Ash's arrival had been nothing but a blur. For the first few hours they didn't even speak. Emma just cried and cried and cried, but Ash didn't hold anything against her. She just held her. No expectations, just love, an unconditional love that can only come from the strongest friendships.

"Shh, It's ok," Ash whispered, gently brushing her hair.

Slowly Emma's breaths became more regular, the tears petered out, and she started to feel a tad less hollow.

"Ash, Cale... he..."

"What happened?"

She swallowed all the air she could before releasing it bit bit by bit. Awkwardly she sat up, no longer needing to lean so much on Ash, but rather look at her levelly.

“Cale is dying.”

Her friend’s jaw dropped, she gaped. Emma felt much the same way as she tasted those words in her mouth, they were sour, sticking to the back of her teeth and stuck like popcorn kernels.

“What?”

“Cale has a heart condition, basically it doesn’t work right and if he doesn’t get a heart transplant soon doctors say he’s only got about,” her throat was halted by a thickness and her eyes threatened to melt again. Determinedly she steeled herself, “ a year and a half.”

“Oh my god,” Ash pulled her hand to her face.

“But that’s not all,” then Emma launched into the long and painful story of how everything was completely fine, utterly normal, until he collapsed. She had never been so scared in her entire life. When she grew up watching movies and television shows she would always scream at the characters, ‘go get help’ or ‘what are you doing just standing around?’, it was always common sense. Always so clear. But when he went to grab his keys suddenly time stopped, she remembered thinking that it looked as though gravity had started working over time, pulling him down until the floor got in its way. There was something so unnatural about it, about how he no longer had control over his movements. When he finally landed his body was splattered on the floor contorted in weird places, he looked dead. And like the fictional idiots she always berated, she was frozen. Even though it felt like so much time had passed, seconds becoming minutes, minutes becoming hours, she couldn’t move.

*Go get help!*

Her fingers itched for her phone.



*What are you doing just standing there?!*

Her knees tried to bend down to him, but they were shaking so much.

His eyes were squinted, like he was working really hard to find something out in the distance, his ocean eyes becoming nothing but slits between curtained windows. He was strained but also unmoving, he looked so much like he was struggling. Yet there she stood, strangely shaking, caught between flashbacks of annoying film protagonists who were doing just as she was and the fact that she couldn't do anything about it.

After Max found them right outside their door and helped her carry him to his bed, he started explaining Cale's situation. He claimed that she had been screaming Cale's name, but she had no memory of it. She knew that she would never forget his words:

"I thought you knew."

It felt almost funny. She would have laughed when he said that if not for the dire reality that they found themselves in. Even as she explained the whole thing to Ash she felt the urge to laugh. The irony.

She kinda did know, but she refused to ask.

She was angry at Cale for saying that they were pretending, but wasn't she pretending too? Pretending like nothing was wrong when she knew for so long that something was. She convinced herself that was the right thing to do, that she was being patient and kind, allowing him to come to her, but wasn't that cowardice too?

"What are you going to do?" Ash's voice interrupted her circular thoughts.

What was she going to do?

"I'm not sure," she admitted.

"Well, no matter what you decide, your number one has your back," Ash declared animatedly pointing her thumb at her chest.

Emma laughed for the first time in days, “Thank you.”

“Anytime,” Ash smiled proudly, “wanna go get Boba?” She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively, she knew how much Emma loved Boba.

“Yes please,” she answered playfully, drawing out the ending of the word ‘please.’

“Yes! Okay, you just need to put on some clean clothes,” she coughed obviously, “and shower,” her friend smirked, “because even though I love you, you smell awful and we are not going to our favorite tea shop like that.”

Emma, while still pained, was coming back to herself again with the help of her friend. *Smelled bad?* She laughed again and through a pillow, as she would describe ‘lovingly,’ at Ash’s face.

“Oh you’re so on,” Ash squealed before returning fire.

Without their notice, the apartment around them started breathing again. Life rushed into the space, clearing the air like a dissipating inversion after a long awaited rain. Curing the miasma that had been collecting there.

It was healing.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

### *Cale*

The air was stale, scented with ancient papers that had been ignored and sat alone on shelves unused, their only purpose to help the occupant of the falsely comforting office appear to be knowledgeable. They soaked the air with the taste of lies and false pretenses. Slight layers of dust along the bindings and the cracked shelves give away. Dust flew from the still shelves only to get caught by the overbearing afternoon light breaking in through the lone window across the room. The light could be felt, like an overbearing mother forcing a blanket on his shoulders. He was being quietly suffocated by the room except for the ever building ticking of a clock growing louder with every dancing piece of dust trapped in the glints that shone from the handful of plaques that lined the wall showing off pointless awards that appeared to be much more important than they really were through their peeling metallic paint melted over plastic. And the shouts from the faux leather couch, that created an assonance with every awkward shift he made in order to achieve comfort only to find himself in much more discomfort. Typical.

He didn't want to be there.

But he needed to.

After he left the dorms, after he failed most of his finals, and after Emma walked away, he arrived home.

He was numb after the entire fallout. He discovered himself reflexibly reaching out for the imaginary refuge he had created with her. As their relationship progressed he knew that keeping everything a secret was wrong, that holding that apart from her was heartless. But he couldn't help himself. Like a child he found himself attracted to the game of pretend, where

everything was okay, where everything was fine. What he had built had no foundation in truth, but that didn't change the fact that he so desperately wanted to keep it going.

That desperation led to lies. Not just to Emma but to himself as well.

They both deserved better.

It had been so long since Cale truly believed that he *deserved it*. And it was after she walked out, and he finally got himself out of bed, he realized that the life he was leading up to that moment had the potential to be so much more, and that maybe just maybe, he could have more, do more, that he could be more.

When he left, he didn't say goodbye to his roommate, but he knew he didn't need to. Max and him had known each other for so long, Max knew exactly what Cale was thinking. He probably thought he was an idiot for taking so long to realize it all.

But he finally did.

Cale was living his life wrong, because at its root he wasn't living at all, he was dying.

It wasn't as though that this realization instantly fixed everything, even he wasn't dumb enough to think that. But when he walked through the front door of his house he marched up to his mom and told her everything. Everything, even the small insignificant thoughts that plagued him constantly. The constant whispers that reminded him that nothing mattered. All of it.

Eventually his Dad even walked in. He was always so stoic, but even his quiet beefcake of a father sat down next to his son and nodded along.

When he finally ran out of words, both his mom and his dad rested their hands on his as they all cried together.

“I think I need help, and I'm ready for it.”

The shaky frowns and empty voice of his was gone and in its place was a firm timbre of confidence. For the first time in a long time he was sure.

“Then let’s do it honey.”

His family of three, small but fierce, huddled close together in their small old fashioned kitchen, and while they might have been emotionally wrecked and pained, he had never felt so strong.

It wasn’t just his relationship with Emma, even his relationship with his parents were becoming strained. They had all been lying to each other and to themselves. But the truth was starting to come to light, and together they would pave the way forward.

Within a few hours Cale had an appointment with his cardiologist, he had been skipping appointments for around two months and needed to finally face up to his actions, and he established a relationship with a new type of doctor.

Cale was never one to believe in shrinks or psychology really, but he knew that if he was going to get the help he needed, if he wanted to be happy, and find acceptance, then attaining some mental help would be the way to go.

That was how he ended up at the stuffy office, with plaques, books, and dust. Cale knew he was being harsh on the lady. Dr. Lysa, but he couldn’t help himself.

“So Cale,” she smiled his way, resting her hands on a clipboard she placed on her crossed legs, “what brings you in today?”

How does he even begin? Maybe he should start with the truth? The thing that scared him the most? Sure, why not? “I’m dying.”

He expected her to flinch or at least look a little surprised, but she remained calm, “Could you be a little more specific?” she prodded.

Cale waited to see the look, the look of pity that reached everyone’s eyes when he told them the truth, but nothing. Not a single shift, “My heart isn’t strong enough to sustain an adult body basically and I’m going to need a heart transplant soon if I’m going to survive.”

She nodded while taking notes on her board, the pen clicked off when she faced him again, “that sounds like a lot to take in, when did you learn about your condition?”

He thought back to that first doctor’s appointment, how scared he was, how he hid behind his mom, like she would shield him from that future, “I was young, maybe five or six? It feels like so long ago to be honest.”

“I see,” she took a few more notes, “Cale, do you want to live?”

Cale was taken aback, “of course I do,” he exclaimed, “who doesn’t want to survive?”

“What are you really scared of?”

How had the conversation grown so big so fast, he was having trouble wracking his brain to find the right answer.

“Be honest,” she reminded him.

Honesty, what he’d been avoiding for so long.

He was scared of dying, he was scared of the mysterious beyond. Was there anything after life? Or just darkness and nothing? Would nothing be nice or is it lonely and suffocating? He was scared of having false hope, of making plans.

He was scared of believing in a future he might never have.

“I think,” he started shakily, “I think I’m scared of planning on a life that I’m never going to get.”

Cale held his breath, waiting for some sort of emotional impact for admitting something real and terrifying. But the pain never came. In fact, the only feeling he was left with was lightness, like a pressure being released.

“Why do you think you feel that way?”

Everything she said felt like a cliché, like something he could easily ask himself. But the thing was he never had asked himself any these questions. While basic, frighteningly so, they

were forcing him to think about the answers even if he didn't want to. Once they were said aloud, his mind consumed them, chewing and chewing until it eventually arrived at an answer.

"I think it all comes from not knowing and the uncertainty. I almost wish I had a disease that would end me with certainty. Because just the idea of a transplant would save everything and give me the life I always wanted, but it's a maybe. I want to dive into that hope, to stay in it forever, and yet—" he took a deep breath, "yet, there's the more than likely chance that I wouldn't get a transplant, that I'll die, that it won't matter. And I think that it's easier for me to believe in death than try and hope for a life."

Woah.

Where did all that come from?

He just spoke without thinking, without hesitation, about things he avoided thinking about at all costs and he felt fine.

He felt better than fine.

The warm light from the window no longer felt like a false warmth but like the first rays of a sunrise. It felt an awful lot like hope.

"Cale," she interrupted his train of thought, reminding him that he wasn't alone in the room when he was so close to forgetting, "would you say that you're happy?"

What a stupid question.

"No," the rock-like word fell from his unhinged jaw.

"If you had to make the choice again, right here and now, would you still choose to believe in death over a chance at life?"

Death was certain.

Everyone faced it.

But life?

That was completely uncertain.

Death wasn't up to him or anyone, but life was entirely up to each and every person.

And his life wasn't certain, why on Earth would he put forth effort, stress, and tears on the off chance that he just might make it? How did that make sense?

*Even knowing all of that, I know that it's all worth it. All of it.*

His mom's voice filled his ears, rushing through his mind like a gust of wind breaking suddenly through aspens, bringing warmth, sunlight, and answers.

*You can't run away from this anymore.*

Max's words rattled his spirit, pushing him forward. His first friend. The first person outside of his family that Cale let inside. His friend was right, he can't run away from the truth anymore. It would always catch up eventually.

*Cale, you do matter. It all matters.*

Emma.

Sorry, sorry, sorry.

She didn't deserve the lies, she shouldn't have felt like she was unimportant. He didn't see her as an actress on a stage, but he did treat her that way. The girl who innocently tripped over him after being knocked down by some drunk party goers, became so important. That one person, who shined so bright, who smiled so big, who was so smart. She was pushing him to be better from the very beginning. Inspiring him to become more, to do more.

He should have realized sooner.

He never needed to pretend to be those things.

Falsely, he believed that to be strong, to be funny, to be 'alive,' that he needed to play the part. But that was never true.



When he looked back on all the happy moments of his life he wasn't pretending to be anything. The moments that brought crinkles to his eyes and laughs to his cheeks weren't the perfectly framed moments with the oscar winning performance. They were Cale losing at Mario Kart for the twelfth time in a row to Max, Cale eating dinner with his family, Cale helping a swimmer on the team out of the pool to give them a pat on the back for a new best time despite the fact that Cale would be soaked in water for the rest of the afternoon, and when Cale caught a beautiful girl in his arms on fateful night.

None of those had to do with the imposter Cale thought he had to be.

In all those moments his heart was still failing, his clock was ticking, and he was dying.

And yet.

His head started to shake, and he laughed, "No, I wouldn't," he slapped his head in his hands, finally catching his breath for what felt like the first time in years, "I wouldn't."

"You would choose to believe in living?" Her toneless voice asked to confirm.

"Yeah, I would," he smiled at her, a real, nose turning, dimple causing, smile.

An alarm buzzed in her pocket. Carefully she reached for her phone to silence it, "there goes our time for the day."

She still didn't show much emotion, but he understood that she was asking him a question with the pause she gave.

"Same time next week?" He asked.

Then she smirked, clearly the answer she was hoping for.

"Sure thing."

December 20th, 2019

Dr. Woods,

This is Cale Martin, I'm emailing you to schedule a follow up appointment. Since I am now on winter break I am free any time just let me know what works for you and I WILL BE THERE (sorry that was a *tad* more aggressive than I thought it would be, but I want you to know how serious I am).

I also want to say thank you Dr. Woods. You have been there for me always and helped me through the years (even though I've been a brat for all of them). I was going down the wrong path for a bit there but I assure you that I will pick myself back up again. I will take care of myself.

Apologetically,

Cale Martin

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

### *Emma*

The abandoned one on the face of the microwave strobed furiously on the ancient microwave. Like a ritual Emma walked over to the microwave, water filled mug in hand, unlatched the door with a satisfying click only to get an angry alarm in response to her sorry attempts to enter a cooking time. Shaken by the sudden interruption squeals she investigated the face on the microwave further to discover the root of the problem.

The lonely one.

As Harry Nilsson would say, the loneliest number.

This was of course not the first time such an instance had occurred in the Davis household. More often than not Emma's impatient sister Mira would stare at the electrified plastic box as if to make, only god knows what, cook faster. And in her food motivated delirium she would open the overworked box before the timer went off. And as Emma liked to imagine, she would skip away blissfully ignorant of the one she left behind and the inconvenience left to the next unfortunate souls to happen upon the number. Which always felt like Emma.

With a silent curse towards her sister she cleared the screen setting the timer free after who knows how long it had been waiting. And tried again.

The microwave started its soothing buzzing behind her as she turned to pick up the phone she had set down on the counter across from her. She checked for notifications, not from anyone in particular, she struggled to convince herself, but she was disappointed by the name that didn't light up her screen. Her eyes were only greeted by the large "December 24th, 2019."

Emma always loved christmas, she didn't voice it often for fear of being labeled the oh so feared term: basic. But it was true. Once she started college three years ago and moved away

from her family she began to realize just how much she valued the holiday, and how much she truly valued her family. She took them for granted when she had them with her constantly, but with the new distance she learned her lesson pretty fast.

It was nice being back at home, Salt Lake City was the littlest big town. While it was a city everyone knew and had an international airport (Emma's standards for what makes a big city) it felt small. Like the entirety of downtown could fit in the palm of her hand. No matter where she went she would run into someone she knew, which was actually something Emma wanted to avoid at all costs. She shivered just thinking about the awkward interaction she had her first time back from college her freshman year.

Eighteen-year-old-Emma never in a million years thought that *she* would be the person that would not know someone from her highschool's name, however she was very quickly proven wrong when she walked into her favorite deli her second day back during fall break that year. The girl at the cash register looked familiar but she hadn't thought much about it simply because it didn't occur to Emma that someone would recognize *her*. It wasn't that she didn't have friends in highschool, she was average, she never expected for someone to know her who she didn't know back but then *it* happened.

"Emma! How have you been?"

She froze, and of course the girl behind the counter didn't have a name tag either. Quickly she scrambled to tell the poor girl that she was doing great and loved school, gave her the order and stepped away so fast many passersby probably saw her as nothing more than a blur. When she got home she immediately ran to her room to check her yearbook for the girl's name: *Jane*.

Maybe it wasn't so great to be back home.

She laughed thinking about how much Cale would make fun of her for her forgetfulness.

But quickly sobered. She had decided she wasn't going to think about that, about him.

Before she could get too lost the beeping of the machine behind her called her attention.

She turned around quickly, rushing to quiet the insane noise.

Maybe the one was worth abandoning after all.

“Emma” he sister called, almost like Beetlejuice, her name was thought one too many times.

“Yeah?”

“Where are you?”

“I'm in the kitchen,” she responded as she sorted through all the tea bags. Her family had always been a tea family. Both her Dads despised coffee, and she inherited the trait as well. She knew if she wanted to sleep, chamomile was the smart option, the good choice, but nothing could stop her hand as it reached greedily for the fully caffeinated english breakfast tea.

Oh well, what could she do?

Her head spun when she heard her sister's footsteps near the kitchen.

A head of stock straight dark brown hair turned the corner, and a smile immediately filled the girl's face.

The kitchen was bright, filled with natural light from the windows that lined the wall to Emma's left hand side, fully illuminating the white marble countertops and the subway tile backsplash. Gracefully, Mira danced around the glowing island, and made her way towards her older sister as she gave her a hug.

Emma returned the hug. Leaning her head on the shorter girl's shoulder while petting her soft hair. She breathed out a laugh, “what brought this on buddy?”

“Nothing,” she smothered the words into Emma's shoulder.

“Nothing? Okay” she trailed off sweetly teasing the girl.

Silence blanketed them as they enjoyed the pause in time that only happens in the moments of a calm Tuesday afternoon. The warm winter light brought out the hints of gold in Mira's hair. Emma smiled.

"Are you excited for tomorrow?" she asked her sister.

"What's tomorrow again?" Mira joked.

They separated and faced each other while Emma went to grab the milk from the fridge to her right for her tea, "mmm, never mind."

Mira laughed heartily before quieting down again, "I miss you when you're gone."

"Oh sweetie," Emma stepped away from her tea to study her sister again, "if I knew leaving for months at a time was the way to get you to be nice to me I would have done it a long time ago."

Mira pouted then said dramatically, "I was trying to share my feelings and establish a deep and meaningful *bond*, and you *mock* me."

"Still think you'll miss me when I'm gone?" She asked playfully.

Mira pretended to think for a minute, "when do you leave again?"

It was Emma's turn to be dramatic, "you *wound* me!"

They laughed together for a few moments, "wanna watch a movie?" Mira asked hopefully.

"Of course! What do you want to watch?"

"Can we watch *The Goonies*?"

"Ugh, not again, how about *Home Alone*?"

"Bleh, predictable much?"

"Hey! It's a classic!"

"Doesn't change the fact that it's a trash movie"

“You take that back!”

On and on they fired back and forth as they walked out the kitchen and up the stairs to Emma’s room where the pair would inevitably watch *The Goonies* per the youngest sister’s first request and Emma surrendered valiantly.

Her sister had gone to bed a few hours ago, leaving Emma alone with her thoughts. Something she had been desperately trying to distract herself from. No matter what she did her mind continuously repeated the same circular thoughts, and there was no breaking out because it always surrounded the fact that she had to wait. Wait for Cale.

There was nothing she could really do for him except promise that she would be there with him. And she would. She would stand by him, until the very end, which of course she hoped would be a long way off. But she would do it. Beyond that there was nothing she could do for him. The healing he needed must come from within himself.

Above her head were her butterflies. The folded origami beings. That had helped her create a home and aided her in accepting her reality.

What were Cale’s butterflies?

What would be the catalyst for his own acceptance? And how long would it take for him to reach it?

For Emma, when she had finally figured out that no matter how much time she moved or had to lose friends, the fact that those relationships were cut short and temporary didn’t take away from their importance; it had hit her randomly like lightning. It hit her quickly and illuminated the shadows that had been hiding exactly what she needed to know.

Would his growth happen like lightning? Or would it bud like a flower and grow slowly with time, sunlight, and nutrients?

Was it selfish to hope that it would be the former? Probably. Did it change that she felt that way? Nope.

She sighed, turning over in her warm bed to check the time on her clock: 1:04 a.m.

That means that back in Providence, it was 12:04.

“Merry Christmas Cale,” she whispered to the butterflies on the ceiling.

“Merry Christmas Emma!” a heavy unidentified lifeform screeched as they jumped on Emma, who had been peacefully sleeping just a few blissful moments prior.

“Five more minutes” she futilely attempted.

“No, we have to go now!”

She was about to shake the girl off her bed with a swift kick when she smelled something sweet and buttery downstairs, “hold on,” she sniffed again to make sure, “is that Pop’s french toast?”

Unflinching in the cool newborn sun sneaking out of the drapes around the bedroom window her sister smirked and gave her a gleeful sideways smile, “only one way to find out,” her voice lilted tauntingly.

She tried to hold out, to not give in, but if there was one thing that Emma Davis couldn’t say no to, it was Pop’s french toast. Her sister won, and yet again she was defeated, “alright you got me.”

Mira laughed sinisterly, “You make it too easy Em.”

With a groan she started to rise. There was always something special in the air on Christmas day. Emma had never been a believer in Santa Claus, but even she couldn’t deny that there was something magical in the atmosphere.



She shuffled around her room to find a bra and her slippers. As much as she wanted to be comfortable on Christmas she knew that family photos would be taken and she needed to be prepared for any outcome. Maybe she should've brushed her hair too while she was thinking about it.

As she exited her room she heard the laughter floating to her ears from downstairs, the scent of sugar and eggs and cinnamon rushed at her senses again tickling her cravings. Her stomach rumbled in anticipation. Without even stepping into the kitchen below she knew exactly what awaited her. Her Dad would be drinking coffee quietly in the corner while her Pops worked tirelessly on his classic toast while also humoring Mira's lousy attempts to assist him.

"Alexa, play christmas music," her Dad's voice joyfully commanded, and with a satisfying ding tale of Rudolf the rednosed reindeer filled the space.

She took a deep breath at the top of the stairs gripping the railing tightly with her right hand. Her family was amazing and she loved them, this would be a very eventful day, far from boring, but very long. This would be her last moment of quiet until late that night.

"Let's do this," she spoke to herself before starting the journey down the stairs yelling, "do I smell french toast?"

As soon as she entered the room, greeted by the grandest smiles her family had to offer she felt a pressure leave her mind, she smiled back.

"Took you long enough," Mira chastised.

Dad muttered something under his breath before walking over to Pops to hand him what looked suspiciously like a five dollar bill.

"What was that?" Emma asked them incredulously.

Pops looked up from the egg soaked bread sheepishly as he admitted, "we may have had a bet about how long it would take you to come downstairs after I started cooking."

Dad gave a bitter smile, "I lost, why couldn't you take two minutes longer?"

She laughed, "I'm sorry, my bad."

Everything around her flooded with life, and bursted with happiness. From the crumbs Mira had undoubtedly kicked under the counter to the one light in the kitchen fixture that went out two days before, all she could feel was peace. For the first time in days she started to think that perhaps things would work out.

Six days later, five pounds heavier, and twenty-five dollars in assorted gift cards richer, Emma was enjoying those last few moments of her break before she would have to leave and return to Providence, to return to Cale.

She walked into her family's kitchen again. Only to once more find herself with an angry microwave burdened with an abandoned timer, when all she wanted was a single cup of tea. Maybe it was time to convince her Dads to invest in a tea kettle. How much did one of those cost anyway?

She systematically cleared the timer and placed her mug on the dais. Before plugging in a timer of her own.

Lost in thought about the pros and cons of making the commitment to different types of tea kettles, she nearly missed the sound of the door bell ringing. She probably would have ignored it entirely if it wasn't for her sister commanding her to answer it since she was 'busy.'

With a huff she strutted to the door, who would be coming by at this hour anyway? It was two in the afternoon on New Years Eve, didn't people have better things to do?

She reached the soft white painted wooden door, and in a single tilt of her wrist pulled the door open, "Yes?" she asked breathlessly, then stilled.

Her mouth dropped open.

There was no way he was here.

Standing before her, in Salt Lake frickin Utah was none other than Cale Martin holding a bouquet of flowers and a hesitant smile.

“What are you doing here?” she heard herself asking.

“Can we talk?”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

### *Cale*

His first thought when he landed in Salt Lake City was how he had never seen so much snow in his entire life. Granted he'd never been any further than the western part of Oregon, but still, the flats of sparkling white as the plane spiraled around the Salt Lake International Airport took his breath away. The city looked so small, tucked in front of the giant snow capped mountains. *Those* had been mountains, nothing like the hills he knew in Providence, it made even Mt. Hood in Portland seem insignificant.

He couldn't believe he was actually in Utah. It was all extremely spontaneous and completely insane, but none-the-less, he was there. And he would find Emma and he would apologize for lying to her and for lying to himself. He would tell her everything she wanted to know and allow them to actually form the real relationship that they both deserved. But it all depended on how she would react to seeing him.

This whole journey began on Christmas morning when he received an envelope from his mom. She had a tiny smile like she was holding back an even greater one as she handed it to him. His family had always been very low key on holidays, even Christmas, but an envelope was strange even for them.

He opened the paper swiftly and when he saw the contents he couldn't believe his eyes. In his hands were plane tickets. One departing from Portland and arriving in Salt Lake City and its return companion.

When he finally tore his gaze away from the papers all he could do was gape at his mom, his eyes asking all the questions he couldn't quite voice.

She allowed that smile she was holding back to shine as she shrugged and nodded her head towards his father who was sitting next to her.

Cale felt his eyes expand even further with shock, his head bouncing back and forth between his parents.

The stoic man across from him, the quiet and consistent presence in his life who never did or said much of anything sighed and said, “son, are you gonna get the girl or not?”

“Dad I- I,” he didn’t know what to say.

His mom answered for them both, “we have always been rooting for you, but we thought we’d give you a little help this time.”

He was speechless. How could they do this for him?

The tickets in his hands were bright and smooth, on the top right corner the date read: December 31st.

“New Year's eve?” He asked them.

His mom laughed, “your Dad’s idea.”

The man smirked a little, “it’s the last day of the decade, thought it would be a nice gesture.”

“You’ve been doing so well lately, more like yourself. It was brutal watching you shrink away from the world a little more everyday and I wasn’t sure what I could do.” Cale tried to reach out to her as her voice quaked and her eyes started to water, she waved him off with a small grin, “But I can see that you are growing and changing. These past few weeks, you’ve talked to a professional, reached back out to Dr. Wood, and I think that trying to patch things up with this girl will help you even more.”

More of her tears started to fall but she still maintained her smile. She didn't show any teeth, it was softer and kinder than that, it flourished beneath the water shining even brighter. Happiness even with the pain and the fear.

It was exactly what he needed to see, needed to hear.

She wiped her eyes quickly then added, "It's been nice having my son back."

This time it was her turn to reach out to him, she stood up from her spot on the floor next to her husband to find her son.

Cale didn't have any time to prepare for the bear hug that found its way around him, but he didn't attempt to break it off, he just held her tight.

"It's been nice to be back."

The week leading up to New Years was exciting but completely nerve wracking. While he wanted to see Emma, to fix things, to try and find a relationship again, he was terrified that she would want nothing to do with him. Now she knew the truth, that he was temporary and falling apart, a collapsing star, a growing blackhole sucking everything away. How could he expect her to come running to him when it was the same *him* that he had been trying so desperately to run away from. With him there was no guaranteed future, no promises he could give her, and yet, he wanted to try anyway.

When he finally got to the airport he began rehearsing everything he wanted to say and how he would say it. He needed to apologize, explain what he's been working on, then he would need to make sure that she knew that he expected nothing from her, it went on and on and on.

Before he knew it the plane was circling the snow covered mountains, in a different time zone, and in the same city as Emma.

It was all a blur getting off the plane, finding an Uber, and arriving in front of her house.

He felt a little bad about reaching out to Mira, Emma's sister, on Instagram before talking to Emma herself. But he wanted to surprise Emma, perhaps it was the romantic in him, perhaps it was him wanting to avoid being turned down before he got the chance, nonetheless it was happening. It was a struggle convincing Mira, but eventually he coaxed the address out of the feisty little sister, he considered himself warmed up for Emma, though he knew that battle would be much more difficult.

As the Uber pulled up to her house, it was at the end of a Cul-de-sac, he was taken aback by the domesticity of it all. For some reason he never imagined the colorful, world changing, society shattering Emma to live in a two story turn of the century house with a light blue paint and a porch with a porch swing.

Even the front door had a "Merry Christmas" sign in an elegant cursive hanging perfectly symmetrical. So completely Emma. He was finally starting to accept this crazy adventure that he allowed himself to go on when the Uber driver pulled away without him noticing, and he was alone, on the end of a silent street. The world felt like it was sleeping, serene. His breath pooled in front of his eyes. He steadied himself at the sight, he was a dragon. He's got this.

Carefully he walked up the path, the three stairs to the porch, and reached the door. There was no turning back. With one last dragon breath he raised his hand and rang the delicate door bell.

The song was immediate, it was a soft trilling of bells, he decided that the soothing sounds were a promising sign. Inside there was a muffled shout followed by slow footsteps that were getting closer and closer and closer.

He quickly straightened his jacket and brushed away any snow from his hair, then checked on the flowers in his left hand. They had been a last minute addition, but once he saw

the bouquet of purple and white daisies at a gas station on his way over he demanded the driver stop so he could grab them. The purple daisies are just *Emma*.

Everything was in order when the door launched open. And standing in the doorway, in gray loose fitting sweats, an oversized baby pink sweater falling off the shoulder, and topped with a perfectly lopsided bun, was Emma.

Her cheeks blushed slightly as her nose turned red from the cold. Once her eyes registered that it was *him*, standing in front of her her mouth hung open in shock.

“What are you doing here?”

She asked, not accusingly, it was actually closer to surprise, he could have sworn a happy one.

A smile broke from his lips, she was here, he was here, he could do this, “can we talk?”

She stood there, in the doorway for seconds that felt like hours, frozen. Unable to fully comprehend what was happening.

Eventually she said, “It’s 2 p.m. on New Year's Eve?”

He laughed before answering sarcastically, “no way, really?”

She glowered at him and right as she was about to rebuttal a squeaky voice came from inside, “Are you trying to turn the house into a freezer? If so, you're doing a great job.”

Cale raised his eyebrows in question at Emma, *What are you going to do?*

She squinted at him, like she was waiting for him to disappear, then she sighed, her body relaxing as she stood to the side, “Tell Dad I’m borrowing his car!”

“Ok!” An eager voice answered.

Emma spun back towards him, a strand of hair falling into her face, “Wait here, I’m going to pull a car out of the garage, and then you are going to explain everything to me.”

It had only been a few weeks, but he forgot how scary she could be, he just nodded.



“Ok good,” she turned to shut the door but then he remembered.

“Wait—” she spun towards him, “the flowers,” he admitted shyly, “ they’re for you.”

Her face finally softened, revealing an almost smile as she reached out to grab them,  
“Thank you,” she whispered.

Then she shut the door.

This was going to be a good day, he could feel it.

They had been driving in the car, past looming mountains, diamond dust, and skeletonized trees for twenty minutes in complete silence before Emma spoke up.

“So?”

He tore himself away from the window and faced her while she studied the road in front of her. She was so amazing, he couldn’t believe how truly powerful her presence was in person. He had already forgotten in such a short period of time just how truly magnificent she was. So graceful and inspiring, from the way she held herself to the way she moved. Just stunning. The breath he was holding escaped and he finally started to speak.

“Emma I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you the truth earlier, actually I’m sorry I *never* told you the truth. I always knew that I should tell you but anytime I started to I couldn’t bring myself to. It was always so nice and happy when we were together. I didn’t want to ruin that, I wanted to stay perfect.” He finished, he hadn’t noticed as he was talking, but by the time he was done his words were nothing but whispers.

Her hands gripped the wheel tighter, and her jaw tensed. In the blink of an eye they were no longer on the road but parked to the side. She was fast. And she was angry.

“Is that why you think I’m so upset?”

Uhhh... he remained silent.

An angry sigh preceded her explanation, “Cale,” she leveled her gaze his way so they were eye to eye, sky to earth. “I am upset because you don’t care about yourself. You were self destructing, all the while using me, *me*, a living breathing person as an escape. While I thought I was growing with and in love with a real person who loved me, you were playing house. Cale that’s why I am upset.”

The air conditioner in the car couldn’t keep up with her heavy and warm breaths that fogged the windows.

“Em,” he reached out for her hand, the one nearest to him on the wheel, expecting her to pull away, but she didn’t. She was giving him a chance. “You were never-” he shook his head *no*, “we were never fake. I think you’re the most real person in the world, the most human person in the world. I look up to you, you inspire me every single day.”

He took a deep breath and looked down at their intertwined hands before continuing, “Emma, you are too good for me. I thought that I needed to be perfect for you. And while yes you are too good for me,” she laughed at that, *good*. “I realized that I don’t need to pretend to be good enough for you, I’m going to work hard every single moment of every day to become better, to grow stronger. And not just for you, but for myself too. I am going to pick myself back up, and you helped me realize how I can and need to do that.”

When he glanced back again, she had tears in her eyes, but they were the same tears he saw in his mom before, they were tears but they came with the kindest smile. A smile of hope and pure joy.

It was time to shoot his shot, “Emma, I want to go to more marches with you, I want to see you change the world like I know you will. I want to make casseroles for you again, and even fight off those goddamned demon spiders with you again. I want to do it all over with you again

and again and again. So Emma, will you give me a second chance? A chance to do right by you and give us the chance we both deserve?”

She didn't make a sound, she just nodded excitedly before she finally spit out a “yes, let's do it.”

And in perfect synchronicity they both unbuckled their seatbelts and reached for each other. Her hands held his face to her own and he kissed her, softly, passionately, and carefully. He would never take this girl for granted ever again. She complimented him perfectly, never let him get away with anything, but also laughed with him, and pushed him to be better while also accepting his flaws. She saw his fear and decided that she would face it with him.

When they broke apart to catch their breath, she smirked, “Cale you never answered my question though.”

What was she talking about?

She shook her head exasperatedly, “How on earth did you get here?”

He laughed, a hearty living breathing thing, “It's a long story, is there anywhere we can go to talk about it?”

“I know just the place,” she answered as she put the car in drive and pulled back onto the road and continued moving forward.

After catching up with each other because of the weeks they spent silently apart from one another at a cute local coffee shop called Sugar House Coffee, which was surprisingly open on New Years Eve, they walked around the town.

“Wait, so why is it called Sugar House?”

The neighborhood they were walking about was called ‘sugar house,’ and the term baffled him. He enjoyed the name, it sounded like it came out of a fairy tail, but that didn't change the fact that he was confused and demanded to know why.

She snorted, unable to hold back her aggressive laughter, “I can honestly tell you I have no idea nor does anyone else for that matter.”

How could no one know? He didn’t understand, “But why though?”

“No matter how much you ask I still won’t know the answer.” She gasped for air, almost spilling her hot Chai latte.

“So unsatisfying,” he huffed.

She placed her hand on the back of his shoulder in support, “I’m sorry, we locals just accept it.”

“Fine,” he lamented drawing out the ‘i’ for an absurd amount of time.

Then she started laughing again, and man, he loved that sound.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I still can’t get over how Mira gave you our address, definitely not a smart move on her part.”

“Well don’t put all the blame on her, I was very convincing,” he attempted to protect the innocent mini Davis.

Emma arched an eyebrow, her targets clearly shifting, now she was entirely focused on Cale rather than her younger sister. Shit, it worked too well.

“What?” he asked sweetly.

“You know what...” then unable to wait she continued, “what did you tell her?”

He took a sip of his hot chocolate with *extra* whipped cream, “Oh you know, just the truth.”

He could almost feel her patience breaking as he left it at that and remained silent, just because he knew it would annoy her.

She rolled her eyes, “Which was?” she prompted.

“I just said, ‘I’m actually a member of the FBI and we need to speak with—” he was cut off abruptly with an elbow to the gut.

“Whatever, I’ll just ask her when I get home.”

It was his turn to laugh, “you really think she’s gonna give you a better answer than mine?”

She stopped, “ugh, you’re so right. She’ll never tell me either. Damn, first Ash, now you, Mira is turning all the people in my life against me.” She shook her head, but it wasn’t with anger, he could tell. She looked happy, content, he felt warm just thinking that maybe, just maybe, he might have contributed to that happiness.

“Hey Cale?”

“Yeah?”

“Wanna go somewhere to watch the fireworks?”

“Davis I’d go anywhere with you.”

There she was with her aggressive eye roll, that he knew really masked how much she loved him.

“You cheese ball.”

“Really Davis? That’s the best you can come up with?”

They continued laughing and mocking each other, the entire walk to the car. Like they had all the time in the world.

They didn't.



## Chapter Twenty-Nine

### *Emma*

The air was frosty, turning her nose red and tickling her lips with a playful fog. The sun was dwindling, leaving only the last few kindles of orange daylight fading to the inky blues of night. The day had taken a turn Emma never expected, when she first saw Cale she couldn't believe what she was seeing. But as soon as she recovered from her shock, she knew that she'd be taking him back, she would never admit that to his face though. None of her plans ever involved letting him go anyway, she was just hurt and upset, mostly from her own assumptions and fears. Then there he was.

So nervous, he made jokes, but he was nervous, she always knew. He brought her flowers, and when she left him on the porch to wait for her to get the car, she finally allowed herself a small smile. Which of course her sister caught.

“Who was it?” her sister asked, feigning innocence.

“I have a feeling you know.”

“Maybe... maybe not.”

It felt like ages ago when he appeared at her door without notice, when it had only been a few hours. She took him on a drive, working hard to appear as furious as she knew she should be but deep down she couldn't shake the joy she felt at his presence. There was something about him that just made her feel so complete. He listened whenever she talked, even if it was the most trivial of things, but focused as if she was telling him the most interesting thing he'd ever heard. He made her laugh, he always kept her on her toes. She loved his wit, something she never thought she'd want in a partner, but it was one of her favorite parts of him.

“Where are we going now?” he asked her as she made another turn.

She barely contained her excitement, “it’s a surprise.”

It was New Years eve of 2019, the end of the decade and she knew one of the local shopping centers was doing a special firework show for the occasion and she knew the perfect place for them to view the lights while also avoiding the crowds.

He gave her a sideways glance trying to appear apprehensive, but she saw how he was trying, and failing, at hiding his excitement just as much as she was.

As she drove to their destination, she kept peering over at him sitting quietly in the passenger seat. His head leaned against the cool window and he fogged up the glass, while simultaneously leaving a greasy imprint of his face in the frame. She wanted to scold him but she just couldn’t bring herself to. The city was what she liked to call a little big city. She could tell that he was thinking the exact same thing.

The lights whizzed by, like shooting stars, but they would have nothing on the fireworks they would watch to bring in the new decade. She was *giddy*, actually tangibly uncontrollably excited. And happy, so so happy.

She was still driving, they hadn’t even reached their destination, yet she felt it entirely, a future. It was crazy. There was no way that they would really be forever, but snuck between the short glances, the artificial meteor showers, and the landmark city that was entirely their own, she could see it, feel it, taste it, a future with him.

He would be a life saving doctor, bringing smiles to everyone with his witty humor, and looking smoking hot in a lab coat, she could see it. She would be a politician running for office, small time at first, but he would listen to her ramble, dream, and wonder about those what ifs. They would be happy.

She shook her head, she was getting ahead of herself.



“What?” he asked with laughter in his voice.

She rested her elbow on the door and leaned her head on her hand, “I’m just soaking in the happiness.”

For a moment she worried she was too whimsical, but he just nodded, “you’re pretty cute for a sponge.” *There it is.*

“Jerk,” she smiled.

“I’m kidding, but I do like that, I’ll be a sponge with you.”

She loved him. He took all of her silly thoughts and treated them with care, he understood her.

“Are we there yet?” He hollered.

“Almost, I promise” she flicked the blinker and turned into a parking garage.

She pulled in and drove up and up and up.

“You know, I don’t want to be a back seat driver or anything, but you keep passing open spots...”

She laughed, “Oh really? I hadn’t noticed.” She was driving all the way to the top, to the level that revealed the open sky.

When the car finally pulled in she parked the car, and turned off the engine leaving the battery running.

Cale unbuckled his seat belt and started getting out of the car but stopped when he saw her reclining her seat.

“Ok, now I’m really confused.”

The look on his face was priceless, she tried to smother her laughter. “We’re here. Just trust me.”

“Ok,” he gave in and leaned his seat back to match hers as well and watched out the front window.

The radio started playing *Someone You Loved* and the clock on the dash turned 00, as the first sparks flew. Perfect timing.

Across from her Cale let out a quiet breath, as his eyes glowed. And then the sky burned, with golds, blues, greens, and it was all theirs. Her hand found his, warm, soft, and sure.

The world was silent except for their music and the rhythmic pops that came from the hundreds of fireworks that shone in his reflective blue eyes. He was captivated, but she was captivated by him. He had told her that he was working hard, that he was growing, that he wanted to live, not to survive, but to really truly live. To be alive, and it wasn't until that look in his eyes filled with wonder and amazement and innocence, that she believed him. This was him. The man she loved, the man she believed in, and the man she could see the sparks of a future with.

She wanted to hold onto this moment for the rest of her life, she wanted to remember the smell of the melted snow on his shoes, the feel of his patient hands, and the sound of his smile. All of it. Forever.

**Ac·cep·tance** \ ɪk'sɛptɪn(t)s \

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- 1: a state of approval or admission to a group or community
- 2: the action of being approved of or admitted
- 3: the act of agreement between two parties or within oneself
- 4: Inner peace and outer peace: usually resulting of personal exploration and growth

## A Little Box

*Emma*

On her sixteenth birthday, Emma Davis had an important appointment at the Salt Lake DLD, a division of the DMV, specializing in drivers' licenses. She had been practicing non-stop in preparation. Practiced and practiced and practiced for the moment she could legally drive herself. To her, it felt like the start of the rest of her life. When the middle aged examiner scribbled his last note and gave her a small 'congratulations,' she was ecstatic. She skipped back to the DLD with the approval papers in her hand and told the kind lady at the desk she had passed. The woman smiled and traded her passing grades for the information forms that would eventually make up her real, shining, driver's license. Her very first. She did it. With one of their free pens, held by many past successful test takers she began her scribbling.

Her name, her address, her weight (which may or may not have been entirely truthful), the basics, until she reached the Organ Donor box.

The little box gave her pause. By checking the small box she could save lives, it seemed like a no brainer. But there was that moment of hesitation, a second where she imagined her body lifeless and being taken apart, it seemed unnatural, brutal, ugly, and above all terrifying. The image gave her chills, but no, she would be an organ donor. She squared her shoulders,

clicked the pen twice in ritual and quickly filled the small, unassuming box, with a delicate check.

Never had she felt such panic and pride in one moment.

She could save lives with that gentle stroke.

But.

She couldn't shake the feeling that somehow she had also signed her life away.

### A Rebel on the Run

*Samuel Hackle, 13 years old*

Samuel Hackel was thirteen years old when after a fight with his overbearing father, and the slight suggestion of his friend Randall, he decided to take his parents' run down Ford Bronco for a joy ride. A few hours before, his Dad screamed at him, he had clearly been drinking and wouldn't remember much of it anyway, which struck Samuel as unfair, how could someone be so cruel and then earn the refuge of escape as well? He would never have to regret those words, never have to think about them again, but Samuel would, over and over. The words would play on and on in his mind, taunting him, leering at him, bearing it fangs.

*What a waste, a shame, an embarrassment.*

*You are and always will be a failure.*

*Pointless.*

Well after slamming the door in his father's bear-like face, he ran down the street to his friend's house, Randall's house. Who said something so simple, yet so completely ground breaking to Samuel.

*What if you got back at him?*

Huh? What if?

That was how a kid who had never even sat in a passenger seat of a car before found himself pushing the stolen car keys in the angry ignition, it growled, like a monster finally out of its cage, and launched into the quiet Providence winter night.

In his haze he never noticed the ice.

Or the girl.

Voicemail

*Emma*

**Emma Davis**

phone

January 11, 2020 at 8:17 PM

0:19.52

**Transcription Beta**

“Hey Cale, looks like you misplaced your phone for the billionth time, five bucks says it's lost in your couch again. You know I'm right. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know I'm on my way back to your place, and no I will not watch another one of your man movies, I get to pick. Also, I just bought up some cupcakes from that new place downtown, I think you'll like them. Oh! Gotta go I'm almost to my car. See you soon, love you.”

**Was this transcription [useful](#) or [not useful](#)?**

Tin Can

*No one in particular*

A car is expected to sound like thunder, huge, otherworldly, and powerful when it crashes. But in reality after the eyes of onlookers take in the crinkled and twisted metal at the speed of light, the speed of sound that follows is a shock. Rather than the bone shaking explosion they expect, what comes after is nothing less than the sound of a stomped on tin can. It's light, brief and entirely insignificant.

When young Samuel Hackel hit a patch of ice and started spinning out of control at an intersection in downtown Providence, the onlookers noticed just that. The unlicensed boy desperately reached for the brakes, spun the wheel and called for help that would never come from the empty car behind him, as the nose of the wild Bronco barreled into the light post on the corner, crunch. At the same time, the side of the car slammed directly into a pedestrian who was just putting her phone in her pocket, crunch. The bag she was holding fell, as she fell. Landing pathetically on its side, the paper soaking the water, like a sponge.

In a moment, nothing could prevent the crash of her head.

With the force of an ice slicked car, her small form collided with the frozen pavement  
beneath her.

Crunch.

## Chapter Thirty

*Cale, 10 hours later*

*Everything was blue, like staring through the clearest, deepest water, endless. As his vision began to adjust he noticed the frame of yellow strands fraying above him, tall grasses. The ground itched his fingers which were tugging at the trampled tendrils he was laying on. Achingly he started to rise from his private imprint in the field. He reached his hands towards the sky and felt the cool breeze that flitted through his fingers and bent the reeds around him in its undeterable force.*

*When he finally stood, he peered down at the corpse-like shape he abandoned below him. Like the tape of a crime scene, his form was etched into the endless meadow that surrounded him. Wilted and withering. Among the living strands that reached past his waist he finally took in the scenery around him. There were no hills, no mountains, no trees, no birds, nothing but wheat stocks and perfect ocean sky. There was no smell, but for the brief hint of earth that the tickling wind brought with it. There was no sound, but for the slight rush of grain which sounded more like a rushing river than anything else.*

*The roaring grew steadily louder, bursting his senses, and hijacking his attention until a lone figure appeared on the horizon. Right on the unshakable boundary between the solid and the ethereal.*

*He pushed through the grass, pushing through, forcing his way forward, he needed to see this person. He couldn't shake the feeling that this would be his last chance, that for some unknown reason he needed to say goodbye.*

*The ground beneath him blurred with his speed, leaving a trail of mutilated life behind him.*



*The figure got larger with the shorter distance, their features becoming more defined. It was a girl, with an untamable brush of long shining hair, like the tufts of dandelions used to make wishes, like summer itself. Light.*

*Wait, he knew this person.*

*He loved this person.*

*“Emma!”*

*That was the moment she turned, beckoned by the sound of her name, her wonderful beautiful name. Her face was flushed with life, and her warm, loving brown eyes met his and he stopped in his tracks, just a few yards away from her, dressed in white, and smiling.*

*But why did she seem so sad?*

*“Em, what’s wrong?”*

*She smiled more, even as tears started to fall to the meadow below.*

*“You’re scaring me, what’s going on?”*

*With a spirit like grace she stepped his way to reach him, she gently placed her hand on his cheek and he instinctively leaned down towards her, melting into her, and placed his forehead to her own.*

*“Emma, why does this feel like a goodbye?”*

*His eyes closed as they both just took in each others’ presence, her tears mixed with the addition of his own, it was as if his heart knew something that his brain didn’t.*

*With a voice of song-like melody, she finally answered him, “Cale, I always said I’d protect you right?”*

*His head jolted up in shock and realization.*

*He remembered every moment.*

*When she took him to his first march for climate change.*

*When the lights flickered out at the outdoor movie, their first real date.*

*When they fought off the spiders infesting her apartment.*

*Her constant vow.*

*She would protect him. Always.*

He woke up gasping for air, and his mom who was sitting by the bed startled. The air rang with rhythmic beeping from the countless machines, reeked with the overly sanitized smell he had grown familiar with over the years, and his skin prickled from the artificial cold and itched from the poor quality hospital bedding that had been excessively washed. Had anyone ever died in these sheets? He would never know.

“Oh honey, you’re awake! Don’t worry I’ll go grab a nurse, don’t move,” his Mom commanded sweetly as she rushed out the door.

He had gotten the call hours ago, just as he happened to be searching for his phone it started ringing, the basic marimba theme screeching from the cracks between his mattress at the headboard. He hadn’t thought much about the call, figured it would be Emma who he expected later that evening, or even his coach, or his roommate who was out for the night, but not The Call. The call told him that he would get his heart. The Call told him that he would live. The Call told him that he would have a life.

When the words came through, telling him to head to the local hospital where his cardiologist and the cardiothoracic surgeon on call would be there waiting for him. He felt numb, the shock, and surrealness of it all caught him off guard. The call to his mom was just a vague feeling to him, he was sure she cried and then grabbed his Dad before immediately coming to drive him to the hospital.

It was happening.

The future was in his reach.

And yet.

He couldn't shake the frizzy feeling that had taken a hold of his chest. That while everything appeared to be going perfectly. Everything felt so completely wrong, like he was a broken vase being held together by a single piece of tape. The slightest breeze would end it all.

*I'll protect you.*

The bed was swallowing him alive, like quicksand, he sunk deeper. He was drowning.

When his feelings of panic and emptiness threatened to spill over his mom reentered the room with the Surgeon he met briefly before going into surgery.

“Knock-knock” an overly cheery male voice called.

His tone shouldn't have grated him so, yet he couldn't shake the wrongness, that no one should feel happy or cheerful at all.

Cale nodded his head in greeting as he laid horizontal.

“Your Mom came and got me when you woke up, glad to hear that everything seems to be going smoothly so far, but we aren't out of the woods—”

He stopped listening at that point, the doctor wasn't saying anything remotely important. Why did he feel so off? That was the burning question he couldn't care less about the recovery time of his surgery, why couldn't they see that he was about to fall apart?

His gaze shifted around the room landing on the generic mass produced painting that could be found in every single room on the floor in that hospital and probably also in hotels across the country. It was an abstract painting. A giant red circle took up most of the canvas, with a thick black line cutting across it. There were a few splashes of yellow around, but it was just that red dot and that obtrusive line invading it. The circle would be perfect if it wasn't for that unwelcome mark.

Aggravated by the black line, he interrupted the doctor who was still listing off horrible after effects of the surgery, “Where did my heart come from?”

“Excuse me?” The doctor asked, confused after being interrupted.

Cale knew that he was just doing his job, but he was running out of patience, “I asked where my heart came from?”

It was a question he had never thought to ask before, never given much thought to. Once he got his heart, would it really be his? He was beginning to realize that maybe the rest of his life wouldn't be a gift, but rather time he stole from some innocent unsuspecting person.

“We can't give out many details until we reach next of kin, but she was a young healthy woman about your age.”

There it was again, that swirling feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Dread.

“Can you tell me more as soon as you can?” His voice asked, but sounded on the verge of begging.

“Of course,” the doctor affirmed as his mother came to sit next to him again.

With a nod he dismissed the surgeon and he left the room.

When his mom reached him she brushed his forehead so tenderly, with such care, she was so relieved. Her face looked years younger, he hadn't noticed just how much his health affected his parents as well, “It's okay Mom, I'm going to be okay.”

“I know, oh baby, I know, and I am so so so happy that that's true, listen, I'm going to go call your Dad and tell him to head over here, we've been taking shifts until you woke up, so I'm going to let him know. Press the call button to your left if you need anything okay?”

“Yes ma'am” he gave her his best fake smile before remembering, “wait could you also grab me my phone?”

“Oh yeah, here it is,” she handed him the small device from her pocket, “you should probably let your girl know you’re okay too.”

She said it so sweetly, so innocently, so completely oblivious to his greatest concerns. His worries that he was so afraid to voice for fear of turning them into reality.

As soon as she walked out the door he started going through his notifications and he noticed a voicemail from Emma.

*Hey Cale, looks like you misplaced your phone for the billionth time, five bucks says it's lost between your mattress and your headboard again. You know I'm right. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know I'm on my way back to your place, and no I will not watch another one of your man movies, I get to pick. Also, I just bought up some cupcakes from that new place downtown, I think you'll like them. Oh! Gotta go I'm almost to my car. See you soon, love you.*

He chuckled softly, which pulled at his stitches, but it felt right.

She was right, he owed her five bucks.

But then his mind woke from the reprieve the message had given him, and echoed his worst fears again, the feeling he just couldn't shake. He didn't want to ask because he didn't want to know.

But this was the perfect chance.

He should text her and get the confirmation that it was all in his head.

Yeah.

Hey, I owe you five bucks - **7:20 a.m.**

Emma? - **7:35 a.m.**

Please answer me, I need to hear from you - **8:02 a.m.**

Please - **8: 20 a.m.**

She wasn't answering. Not a single text in an hour, but that didn't mean anything. She could have lost her phone, or she could be sleeping in, or she could just be on a really long phone call with her sister Mira. Yeah, there were plenty of explanations.

Plenty.

"Knock-knock" the chipper voice came again.

He tore his gaze away from the phone to see the surgeon standing in the doorway, "Hey there Cale, so I have the information that you wanted on the donor, the family said I could share it with you, but they also wanted to get your name as well. Now this doesn't mean that you have to meet with them or anything—"

"What's the name?" He asked.

"The girl's name was Emma, Emma Davis."

Thunder pounded in his ears, everything around him didn't matter anymore, the voice of the doctor was gone, the beeping of the machines gone, the leering red circle gone. It was all gone. Like she was.

Gone.

How?

She was just with him, they were going to watch a movie together, eat junk food, talk about unimportant things. Imagine the future, a perfect future, and listen to each other's dreams. She couldn't be gone, she was going to change the world. He could feel it from the moment he met her, that she was going to do great things. She couldn't just be gone.

The last time she called him he didn't even pick up, her last conversation with him didn't even happen. How could that be? That all that was left of them was a recorded message on a phone. It couldn't be true.

Apparitions swarmed him, but he couldn't make out their faces or their sounds, it was all just colorless masses.

She was gone.

No.

She was gone but stuck.

She would never make jokes, never graduate from college, never attend her sister's high school graduation, never change the world because she was trapped.

Her heart was within *him*.

They had lost their future so that *he* could have one. But what future would he have without her? He hadn't realized it at the time, but he had been seeing their potential, he was imagining their life together.

They were going to graduate, she would run for office anywhere, and he would follow. She would make the world a better place, election by election, person by person, and minute by minute. He was planning to be there for all of it. Holding her hand, watching her succeed. He was going to sit front row at all of her speeches at all of her moments.

He could see it so clearly.

How could that be gone?

A flame blown out by a single moment.

How was this fair? How was this the outcome? They were supposed to be a perfect match. They met when she fatefully landed in his arms, and then reunited because his usual coffee shop just happened to be closed? Was it all coincidence? Not the fate that he had always believed it to be.

Sound started growing again, starting with a lightning fast beeping. What was it? It was going so fast.

“—he needs to calm down, his heart can’t handle this—”

*His heart*, his heart? No no no, it wasn’t his, it was hers. He never wanted this. Couldn’t he have survived some other way?

This wasn’t how it was all supposed to happen.

This wasn’t how it was all supposed to happen.

Em, why did it have to be you? Come back please.

“We need to put him under”

“Cale? Cale?”

His thoughts slowed, inching, flickering by achingly. He didn’t want this. When he said he would work to live this was never what he meant.

His featureless vision tunneled until the only thing he could see was her smile.

This wasn’t what he wanted.

She was the last thing he saw before a blanket of black consumed him.



## Chapter Thirty-One

*Emma*

## Chapter Thirty-Two

### *Cale*

The funeral took place eight days after the accident. Her family decided to bury her in Providence rather than Salt Lake City, when he asked Mira she explained how since she never had roots in any one place, wouldn't it be best to let her remain in the first place she decided on her own? And selfishly he loved the decision. He needed her to be closer, he wasn't ready to be left alone with a piece of her and no tangible monument to her life.

Her Dads and Mira came by a few days after the surgery.

At first they had all cried silently together, there were no words. What could they say to make their new reality alright? They lost a daughter and a sister in the blink of an eye, and he was left with her heart. A heart that was never meant to beat without her.

Eventually Mira broke that pressure filled silence, "Can I listen to her?"

It brought him some peace in that moment that perhaps he could give them this one thing, this one small rhythm, and vow to them to protect her for the remainder of his life.

They hadn't spoken again, just sobbed together.

Mira became a bit of a regular, and Cale was shocked to find that he enjoyed her company. They couldn't fill in the holes that Emma had left, however between them was this mutual understanding of the others' loss.

Her Dads never came to visit. Not that he wanted them too, if anything he was glad they didn't. The look in their eyes, it was a look he never wanted to see again, the exact opposite of the looks his own parents gave him. Rather than the newfound hope and joy he saw in his own mother and father, they only gave off despair and emptiness.

Maybe that was why Mira visited Cale so often, to see that even in the wake of such awful tragedy that Emma's death wasn't meaningless. She saved him, in so many ways. Before she died, she pushed him to grow, to accept the truth, to live in light of that truth. Then she quite literally saved his life. A life without expiration dates.

It was during one of those visits from Mira, that she invited him to the funeral.

“Please come, for Emma.”

And how could he say no to that? No to Emma? He could never.

That was how, eight days later, he found himself in a wheelchair pushed by his Mother on the snow laden grass in the Providence cemetery.

The cemetery was a small one. With large trees around the borders, making the cemetery feel secluded, private, and peaceful. Snow had been falling from the gray stained clouds for days, and that day was no different. But it was a magical kind of snow. Large flakes, the size of fifty cent pieces, collided with the ground with surety, unswayed by any breeze or interloping wind. There weren't that many people at the service. Simply her Dads, Mira, her best friend Ash, and a handful of faces he didn't know.

The scent of freshly tilled dirt filled his nose, aggravated by the moisture that the unceasing snow created, and his ears filled with the cries of the family across the way.

Cale didn't cry though. While he felt the bite of the air on his nose, heard their tears crash into the frozen ground, and tasted the loss on his tongue, he felt disconnected. It was like watching a movie from afar, but also like he was trespassing.

While he acknowledged on a logical level that her death wasn't *his* fault, and that nothing he did could have changed the fact that she was no longer with them, he still had this unresting monster of guilt roaring in his mind.

He felt like a murderer.

What right did he have to attend the funeral of the perfect person whose life he stole?

It all felt so twisted.

There was a casket resting beside the depthless hole. Somewhere in his brain he knew that she was in there. But it didn't stick. The girl with the smile, the laughter, the unstoppable force would never be so still, could never stay within the confines of an airless box.

*Murderer.*

As the dirt soaked the water of the snow that melted a top it, the sound around him faded as well. Until nothing was left but the unforgivable beating that angrily screamed in his ears. Growing indefinitely louder, drowning everything else out. As if he could ever forget where it came from, as if the idea ever left his mind, the heart pounded into his soul.

*Murderer.*

He didn't feel anger towards the power he stole, only tremendous guilt and sorrow. It was right to scold him to taunt him, it just echoed the twinned thoughts he already had.

In a matter of days he had become nothing but an echochamber for his own despair, it was building, growing in volume, becoming something monstrous and uncontainable. He waited for the moment that he would explode, however he was starting to think that rather than an explosion, it was more like a flickering light, and no matter how much it tried to stay on it was growing dimmer with each whisper. Until one day it would disappear, becoming void of any light at all.

*Murderer.*

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the casket that was both Emma and Not Emma, got sent to the deep. It would also never see light again. A light was dimming, eventually leaving everyone present in darkness, and there was nothing anyone could do about it, but watch as the last notes glinted in the reflected snow.

*Murderer.*

It felt anticlimactic. As he caught the final glimpse of the overly shiny metallic paint fade, he still didn't shed a single tear.

Not one.

Far away he was aware that people were speaking, sharing stories, laughing at fond memories. But he just watched the soon to be filled hole. Glared at it more like.

He was waiting, holding his breath for the pinch that would finally wake him from this god awful nightmare world.

He waited.

He waited.

Waited.

But no pinch came, no alarm blasted his unexpected eardrums, and no one was standing next to him to tell him it was all a dream. Nothing.

*Murderer.*

And it was at that moment that he finally started to cry. No matter how long he waited and wished, nothing would change. This was reality. She was gone. He would never hear her laugh again, never get to check her name on a political ballot, never attend her wedding, never catch up over drinks.

*Murderer.*

His mind was attacked with all the nerves. The moments that were to be expected, the moments of the future that he already took for granted, the instances of a future that no one would ever get the chance to see.

That *she* would never get the chance to see.

Could this really be it?

He spent his entire life avoiding his own death; he never thought about the act of someone else in his life dying. He never thought he would be the one to grieve. And yet there he was. Weeping into his ice cold hands, a safe distance from the funeral, his mother standing silently behind him.

*Emma, I love you, please come back.*

No response ever came, but without a movement, a sound, or a touch, he felt a sense of comfort. To this day whenever people asked him about whether he believed in an afterlife, he always explained that he wasn't sure, but he did know that when he went to the funeral for the woman who gave him his heart, and the first love of his life, he had a single, brief, instance, where he felt *something*, something other. He was on an emotional ledge, towering on a precipice, about to fall into an abyss of loss, when he felt an indescribable warmth radiating from his heart, her heart, assuring him that everything would be okay, that *he* would be okay. In an instant he recognized that he could trust that feeling. Almost as if it was her.

He would never be certain, but he believed in that moment and that feeling, often he'd say "there's nothing I'll ever trust more."

It was there, in the snow, at the funeral, surrounded by countless-nameless-faceless people, that he could start to heal.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

*Emma*

## Chapter Thirty-Four

*Cale, one year later*

Cale kneeled in front of the slab of stone stuck in the ground, with the words “Emma Davis, Sister, Daughter, Friend, Hero; 1998-2020.”

He couldn’t believe that a year had passed since he met her. Time passed by so quickly, most of the summer he spent making up for classes he failed the fall semester when he had been drowning in his disastrous mind, and classes he struggled through in the spring as he worked on his recovery. The physical healing was easy compared to the emotional agony of it all.

He tried to come back to her grave at least once a month. And each time it felt like he was losing her again, he felt like a murderer and a thief. Every time, every month, like clockwork. The sorrow would surround him and smother him, taking away any footholds he thought he had in the real world and tossing him back into that hollow center that her life desperately filled.

“Em, I miss you every single day,” he smiled to himself, “I’m going to retake the MCAT soon and I won’t leave the answers blank this time.”

*Nice segway.* He could hear her mock him. He shook his head, moving to shake the last few tears from his eyes.

“I am going to keep pushing forward. I don’t think I ever told you enough, but you really did inspire me. You were going to change the world.”

He filled his lungs with the misty fall air before placing his hand on the top of her stone.

“So I promise to live each and every single day like you would. I want to make you proud. Watch me Davis, I’m going to do it all.”

*You better.*



Slowly he stood, feeling the familiar soreness of his chest that came with all movement. The pressure had started out as an unwelcome pain, a reminder of all he had stolen and taken from the world. But he grew fond of the sensation. No longer an echo of what was gone, but a message of everything he needed and wanted to achieve with his renewed time.

With a brush of his hands, the damp leaves that persistently stuck to his legs fell away. Freeing him of their weight and dirt. The sun flitted through the few clouds in the sky illuminating every branch in the trees that surrounded him, and shining through the slight mist, making the originally eerie scene so much warmer.

Cale couldn't be certain, but he thought of Emma how maybe just maybe, this was her way of showing him that she was watching and would be watching, cheering him on and pushing him forward.

He tilted his head up to the sky in greeting, he was watching for her too.

## Epilogue

The stained glass windows shower the worn hardwood floors with one of a kind reds, blues, and yellows. His lungs stretch to welcome the warm nostalgia filled church air. Today is the start of the next chapter of his life. Perhaps that's why he found himself remembering all the events of his junior year of college. If not for the events of that year he never would have gone to medical school, never would have worked with Doctors Without Borders, and he never would have met May.

Creaks fill the air as his feet fidget across the floor where many grooms stood before him. They probably also reflected on their past the same way he did. He let his shoulders rise and fall with his deep breathing. He really needs to relax. This is going to be the best day of his life.

The people that sit around him chat casually amongst themselves as they wait for May to arrive. If only she were already there, he needs her to calm him down when he starts to get nervous like this. She always knows what to say and what he needs to hear. His fiancée, soon to be wife, *holy god*, understands him like very few ever could.

A clap landed on his shoulder, Max, his best man, stands next to him looking his way with concern, time was good to him too. Now he's a professor at the same university that they both attended, "you good? Don't tell me you're getting cold feet?"

His eyes roll in response, "no, I was just lost in thought. I can't believe that I got here."

A smile answers him, "you deserve it, to be happy."

"Yeah."

Man, he is happy. He has his dream job, a great family, soon to be a part of another family. After Emma, he felt like it was wrong to even think about dating again, how could he? After she gave him so much? But deep down he could feel her cheering him on, encouraging him

to live his life. As he stands up at the altar of the small worn church house, one that had existed in Providence since its conception, he can almost imagine her there. One of the countless friends and family chatting away the time. She would support him. It took him a while to understand that, but he's so relieved he finally got it through his thick skull.

He met May two years ago, she was a nurse who also worked with Doctors without Borders, they were put on the same mission in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It was an immediate connection. Like they spoke the same language that no one else could ever possibly understand. Her soul was light, honest, and optimistic, much unlike his own. No matter what they saw or experienced on their adventures, she helped him see new perspectives, find new ways of thinking, and locate the light at the end of the tunnel.

When she asked him why he joined he told her the whole story, of how a girl saved his life and how he could only ever hope to one day be more like her. He expected her to run away, hide from the hideousness that he normally tried to mask and keep hidden from the rest of the world, but she didn't. Her small, curvy, and strong frame stayed with him. He would never forget the words she said to him that night, on the beach after a long and tiring day of work when he'd exposed his heart to her, *'Let's do it together'*.

She was just as inspired by Emma's story as he was. They would make the world a better place one step at a time.

They dated for a year and a half before he proposed. He never thought he would ever get the chance to propose to someone so when the time came he wanted to make it perfect, magical, and one of a kind, but instead every single plan he formed had fallen apart. The bouquet was attacked by birds, the champagne bottle broke, and the candles he had so precariously set up in a local park all blew out with a single, spiteful, gust of wind. But when it all went wrong, she laughed. When *he* was ready to give up, throw in the towel, and go home. *She* smiled. And

May's smile left him with the feeling that everything would be okay. And at that moment it was. So when the candles blew out and the bouquet was down to three measly roses, he kneeled, and before he could even ask she said yes. They cried together and laughed together, as they would hopefully continue to do for the rest of their lives.

A knock shatters his reverie, the signal that she would be there soon. Everyone simultaneously stops talking as the string quartet they hired start to play. The double wooden doors open as everyone stands in unnatural unison.

Gasps fill the air and tears begin to fall. She arrives in a stunningly fitted dress. Her hair bounces with perfect curls, but her smile, her smile, is what gives him that fluttery feeling.

Their eyes meet from across the room and everyone else disappears. Her mouth ticks up with a silent laugh as his does the same thing.

This is it.

His future.

He couldn't wait.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I want to thank my Novel Writing Workshop at the University of Utah. I am beyond grateful to my professor Michael Gills, who pushed me to be better even if I didn't believe him at first (he was usually right). I also want to thank my peers from that class: Charlie Barth, Natalie Colby, Katerina Excell, Summer Furrer, Tervela Georgieva, Nick Goudsmit, Ryan Racinez, Madeika Vercella, and Joseph Moss. Without these amazing people by my side, working with me, motivating me, and helping me, I never would have been able to finish this novel.

Secondly, I need to thank all my lovely friends, Mckenna Hunt, Kristin Jeager, Mary Muench, and Chelsea Young. They stuck with me throughout the entire process as I wrote the book. They all cheered me on and helped me through tough spots and confusion. I couldn't have done it without you guys.

Kristin Jeager gets an extra shout out for assisting me in my phonetic spellings for all my definitions throughout the novel, thank you for being so amazing and using your incredible knowledge and expertise to assist me on my project.

Lastly, I need to thank all my family, who always believed that I could do it even when I didn't. My aunt Emily Smith and cousin Olivia Smith, especially, since they both read the entirety of my novel and gave me their thoughts and support. They always thought I'd write a book and they were right. Also, thank you for finding the best typo of all time, #quartyardforever.

It took a village, thank you everyone for being mine.

## OUTLINE AND ADDITIONAL NOTES

### **Complete Description**

*If I Should Die Before I Wake* is the story of a young woman named Emma meeting a young man named Cale by coincidence, and how they struggle through their individual trials while also growing stronger together. The two both go on journeys of self-discovery and exploration while also providing strength, support, and insight for the other.

### **Synopsis and Overview of the Entire Novel**

My novel, currently titled *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, is a book that will be told in five parts and will follow two main characters. The first part is focused on how the two main characters, Emma and Cale, first meet and how they end up missing their chance. Both of them feel regret about missing out on what they both felt could have been something special. Also, we learn that Emma has a conflict of what path she wishes to take in the future, specifically with her major. Cale knows exactly what he wants to do, but might be unable to achieve his goals since in this first part we learn that he has congenital heart disease. Both have conflict individually and in their mutual relationship.

The second part is about our two characters getting a second chance with one another. Due to outside influences, Cale is forced to get coffee and a new coffee shop, which is where Emma often frequents. They meet again and together go on a march for climate change awareness. Sparks fly until Emma is struck with a migraine and has to leave. Cale takes care of her and they exchange contact information.

Part three follows the beginnings of a relationship. Cale and Emma grow closer, becoming ever more important to the other person. They go on dates, study, and spend time together constantly. Things really start to look up for the two of them, until Cale shares with

Emma about his sickness. They get into a huge fight about it since Cale won't admit the seriousness of the issue and Emma can't stand his denial and blatant disregard for his own life.

The fourth part follows them going separate ways for their winter breaks. The pair is distanced not just emotionally from their fight but also physically as they go back to their families for vacation. But it ends with the two reconciling and growing stronger together. They realize that they can be each other's strength.

The fifth and final part surrounds an accident. Emma receives a terminal head injury and as per her final wish, we learn that her heart is compatible with Cale. And Cale receives her heart before he knows that it's hers. Cale is given a new shot at life all because of Emma. She became his strength and now motivates him to remain true to himself and never waste a moment of his life and that he should do everything he can to leave the world better than he found it.

### **Chapter by Chapter Outline of the first 150 Pages**

*Prologue (1-2):* From Cale's POV, it takes place a year after the rest of the events of the novel. It reveals to the reader that Emma passes away and Cale will still carry the weight of that loss for a long time.

*Part One (3-8):* A short story vignette in Allison's POV as she saves her relationship and also inadvertently sets off the main romance between Emma and Cale.

*Chapter One (9-18):* The first chapter from Emma's POV and the real start of the main story. It picks up as Ash, Emma's best friend, forces her to attend a school function.

*Chapter Two (19-26):* The first chapter from Cale's POV we get to see Emma and Cale's first conversation together.

*Chapter Three (27-33):* Emma's POV, she realizes how late it is and has to leave, but she leaves Cale without saying goodbye.

*Chapter Four (34- 42):* Cale's POV, we get insight into Cale's life and learn that he has Congenital Heart Disease.

*Chapter Five (43-52):* Emma's POV, we get insight into Emma's life and her struggle to choose a life path.

*Part Two (53-54):* An omniscient narrator describes a scene and situation, the dichotomy of two coffee shops, and a set up for our two main love interests to see each other again.

*Chapter Six (55-63):* Cale's POV, we get a closer look into what Cale's dorm life looks like and learn that he has to go buy coffee and thus go outside the norm.

*Chapter Seven (64- 73):* Emma's POV, we finally get to see the two of our love interests run into each other again and get their second chance.

*Chapter Eight (74-79):* Cale's POV, they decide to spend some more time together and Emma takes Cale to his very first political march.

*Chapter Nine (80-89):* Emma's POV, we get another close look at Emma's childhood and her values. While Cale and Emma get to know each other better and have a great time.

*Chapter Ten (90-95):* Cale's POV, Cale feels guilty for not being able to help Emma more with her migraine at the end of the last chapter. So he decides to bake her a comfort casserole. We also get to witness his relationship with his roommate Max.

*Chapter Eleven (96-103):* Emma's POV, her migraine finally passes and she goes out into her kitchen only to be pleasantly surprised by Cale's casserole in her fridge.

*Part Three (104-106):* An Omniscient narrator describes a flyer that will land on Emma's car for a movie night. This will set up their first REAL date.

*Chapter Twelve (107-113):* Cale's POV, we will get to see him help run a swim practice as all the boys talk to him about his first date that will take place later that night.



*Chapter Thirteen (114-121):* Emma's POV, the start of their movie date together this will take a more serious tone as they start to really understand each other.

*Chapter Fourteen (122-130):* Cale's POV, the end of his date, he's reflective. He thinks about how much time he has left and whether or not and how he should tell Emma about it.

*Chapter Fifteen (130-140):* Emma's POV, this is a happy chapter, the start of a relationship as fall time increases, they see each other all the time and do homework together. Emma starts to realize how much she cares for Cale.

*Chapter Sixteen (140-150):* Cale's POV, very similar to Emma's POV. A glimpse of happiness, they are an official couple now. But it will end in their first horrible ugly fight.

## **A Description of the Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How**

*Who:*

### **Main Characters:**

Emma Davis and Cale Martin

### **Secondary Characters:**

Ash and Max

### **Tertiary Characters:**

Emma's Dads (Dad and Pop), Cale's parents (Kathy and Frank), Emma's younger sister (Mira), and Doctor Wood.

### **Quaternary Characters (characters we only see once):**

Coaches, Boys on the swim team, and fellow classmates. We might also meet some doctors and nurses.

*What:*

This is a novel about two unsuspecting college students finding love. They have their own personal journeys while also helping and aiding each other. During this time (late 2019)

America's president is Trump and the world is fairly calm. There is excitement in the air about the nearing 2020s. An election is coming, but it's not super pressing yet. I feel like this is the moment in time that best encapsulates a calm before the storm. They have no idea what the next year would have in store for them.

*Where:*

The book takes place at Burton College in Providence Oregon. This is a city I made up, but I have based it off of Walla Walla, Washington, and Whitworth University (Spokane). So while it's a false reality it's based very much on truth. I have also given the city in the novel an origin story and how the town was founded. I don't know if I'll use it in the story, but I like having it because it gives me the right concept of the town and the overall vibes. If you want to hear the story of how the town of Providence came to be then please read the Providence section in the map portion of the midterm packet.

*When:*

The prologue takes place: Thursday, October 13th, 2021

The first scene of the book takes place: Friday, September 13th, 2019

Emma dies on: Sunday, January 12th, 2020

The last scene of the book takes place: Saturday, February 1st, 2020

The epilogue takes place: Thursday, October 13th, 2021

*Why:*

My novel *If I Die Before I Wake* follows two characters that are searching. Cale is searching for hope, while he might not be aware of it. And Emma is searching for a plan and her future. Both of my characters are lost, so the 'why' of my novel would be that search. Both of my characters will learn from each other and lean on each other and through that new growth and

personal exploration that they encourage from each other will help them find those answers that they are looking for.

*How:*

The way that the book has the ability to move forward or the 'How' is the fact that my characters feel an unexplainable pull to each other. They have this inability to give up on one another. This tug and this longing is how the novel can operate.

*Maps and Research*

### **Cale Martin (Cale Definition = Human, Mortal)**

- Very motivated to be the best person that he can be
- He was a very angry child, and that would be because of his condition, it made him volatile and felt as though the consequences no longer applied to him, like a criminal who has already committed murder... what can you do that's worse???
- He is definitely an only child, with two loving parents, his dad is very reclusive while his mom is very warm. His mom is a stay at home type of mom, she loves giving love and warmth to others. His parents love him, and they are a good family except that there is a strain of his illness (congenital heart disease), but his family, his mother in particular, doesn't like to talk about it. His grandparents on both sides are very conservative.
- He makes friends with literally anyone and everyone and he volunteers often. He strives to be kind and do good always because of how much he's learned about himself after struggling to do good as a kid.
- Principal's office as a child, because he just refused to do anything that he didn't want to do, and he definitely didn't respect authority.

- One day as a freshman in high school his friends, people in the wrong crowd wanted to rob a liquor store, but when Cale was on his way to meet them, he got a flat tire and didn't end up meeting them. But things had gone wrong, and one of his friends had brought a gun, they killed someone and all of the friends on the scene were arrested and ended up doing jail time. This was his wake up call.
- Birthday: Pisces March 1st
- Favorite Color: turquoise
- Favorite food: not necessarily a food, but he's always on the hunt for the best hot chocolate.
- Hogwarts House: Gryffindor

*Family:*

Mom: Kathy

Dad: Frank

His major is Bio, he wants to go into medicine and help other kids like himself.

**Emma Davis (Emma Definition = Savior, Universal)**

- A planner without a plan
- She's going into her junior year of college
- a little sister, who has her whole life planned out, going into her senior year of school
- name Mira (future seer)
- She has two dads, who are both estranged from their parents for their disapproval, which now makes them the MOST supportive parents in the whole

world, one dad is her biological dad the other was a surrogate who isn't in the picture, nor does Emma want her to be.

- Ever since she was young she's just been interested in everything, she wanted to be a librarian, a doctor, a reporter, a writer, a scientist, and a politician. But nothing ever stuck, she's so envious of her little sister for having plans.
- She decided to go to a school far away, to find some new inspiration for herself, to forge her own path.

### *Family*

DAD AND DAD:

- She's the biological child of Dad (David) and Mira is the biological child of Pops (Jim)

### *Key Moments*

- Reading, she's always had a love for books and fiction which gives her the ability to see what different lives are like, but this makes it hard for her to decide what she wants.
- At a restaurant as a family they all looked on as someone choked and a waiter walked in to save his life. When they left the restaurant her little sister, 12 at the time, (Emma was 15), said that's who she wants to be when she grows up. And thus decided on a career in medicine. And this made Emma feel like she was falling behind.
- Her parents always go to the pride marches and make signs and stand up to oppressors. When she went to her first march, she was 5, and she was lifted onto her father's shoulders and she just looked out over the vast sea of people and knew she wanted to change the world.
- Birthday: A Virgo, August 28th
- Favorite color: Maple Leaf Orange, its like Fall, and comfort

- Favorite Food: literally any kind of potato
- Where does she want to travel most in the world: she wants to go to France and try their public sparkling water fountains.
- Hogwarts House: Ravenclaw

*Where*

City; Providence, Oregon (fictional)

- Its an hour away from the coast
- Two hours south of Portland
- It's small, the population consists of old folks who have always lived there, whose children have all left, and the college students who all attend the one liberal arts college in the area.
- FOUNDATION
  - The town was founded by one man who left his Oregon trail group in search of the ocean, he started to feel hopeless that he'd never reach it and ended up stopping where you'd now find Providence. He never saw the ocean.
  - But the city has a main street with any store you'd need, and there's a strip mall 15 minutes away by bus for all your chain clothing needs.
  - The town is steadily growing, it's not big, but it's starting to get more popular with lots of people wanting to escape cities these days.

The School: Burton College founded in 1890

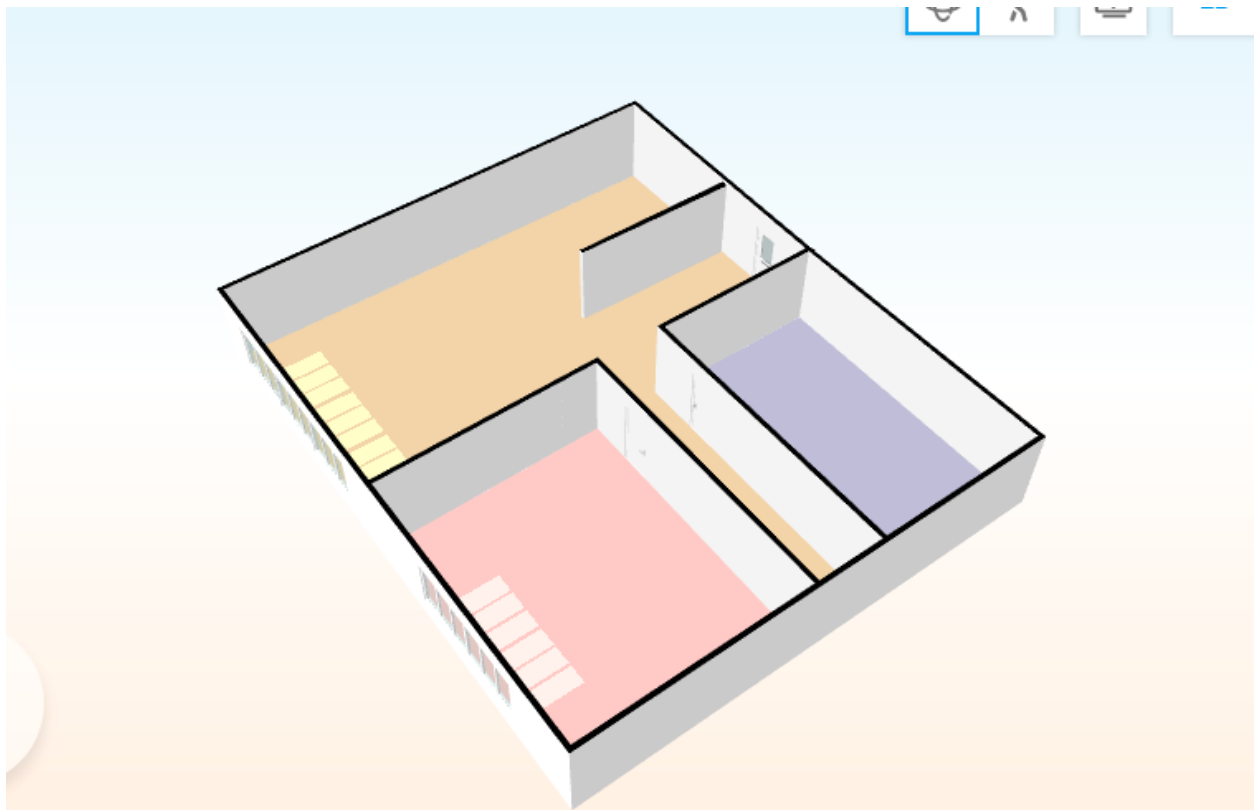
- Everyone says that there are secret tunnels under the campus that connect every building, but no one has found them.

- It's small, but it has big trees everywhere and flower pots hang from the light poles in the fall and summer. In the fall the few trees with leaves turn lovely orange and red. And in the winter the snow falls and it's stunning with the white and the pine trees.

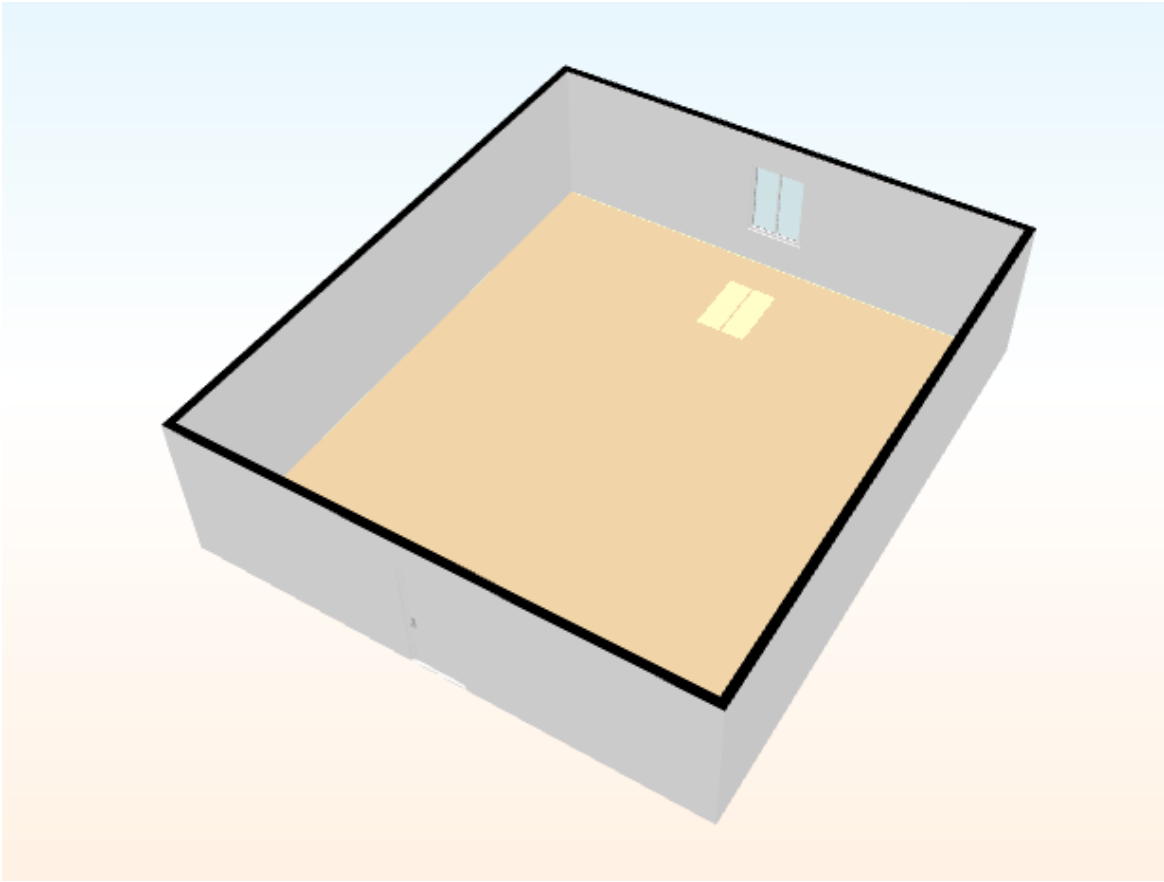
\*\*It's a fictional city and school, but is very based in Whitworth University and the town is based on Walla Walla Washington\*\*

*Literal Maps:*

### Emma's Apartment

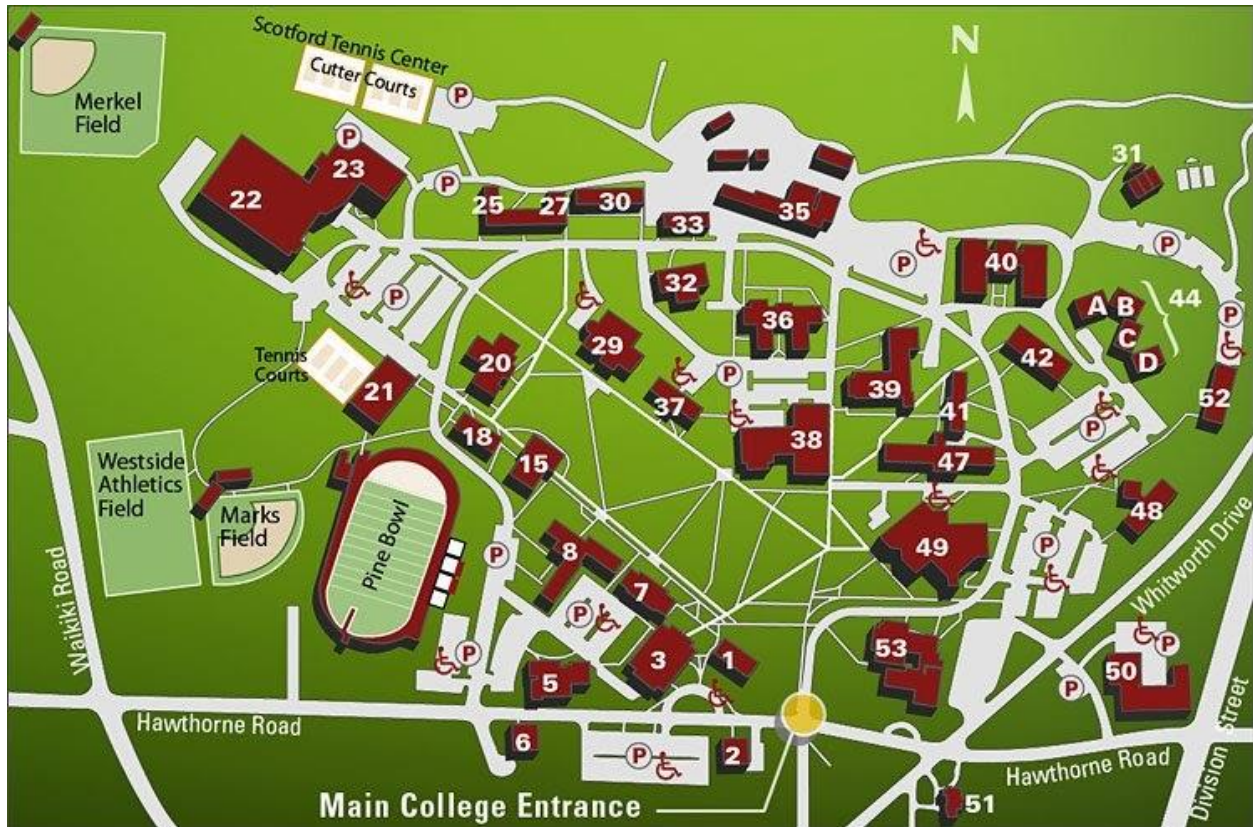


**Cale and Max's Dorm**



**Map of Whitworth University (Spokane Washington)**





### *Space and Time*

- The entirety of the novel mostly takes place between September of 2019 and Ends around February of 2020. There are brief scenes from fall of 2021 at the beginning and the end. The Now time of the novel is just after those moments seen in 2021, the now time is the moment when Cale has found a path and his way and his hope.
- Furthermore, the space isn't much, all we see are the school and the living spaces of the characters. We will get moments at their family homes, but it honestly won't go many places. The story lives in modern day America and in the real 2019/2020 world.

### *Research*

#### **Important Details on Congenital Heart Disease**

\*Cale was born with a faulty heart, but they said that it wasn't too bad but ever since his senior year in college it's been getting worse and worse if he doesn't get a heart transplant in the next two years, it's fatal.\*

- Hearts only have 4-6 hours to be transplanted.
- Body size is important and blood type.

### **Details on Heart Transplant Surgery**

#### *Risks*

- Besides the risks of having open-heart surgery, which include bleeding, infection and blood clots, risks of a heart transplant include:
- Rejection of the donor heart. One of the most significant risks after a heart transplant is your body rejecting the donor heart.
- Your immune system may see your donor heart as a foreign object and try to reject it, which can damage the heart. Every heart transplant recipient receives medications to prevent rejection (immunosuppressants), and as a result, the rate of rejection continues to decrease. Sometimes, a change in medications will halt rejection if it occurs.
- To help prevent rejection, it's critical that you always take your medications as prescribed and keep all your appointments with your doctor.
- Rejection often occurs without symptoms. To determine whether your body is rejecting the new heart, you'll have frequent heart biopsies during the first year after your transplant. After that, you won't need biopsies as often.

- During the biopsy, a tube is inserted into a vein in your neck or groin and directed to your heart. A biopsy device is run through the tube to take a tiny sample of heart tissue, which is examined in a lab.
- Primary graft failure. With this condition, the most frequent cause of death in the first few months after transplant, the donor heart doesn't function.
- Problems with your arteries. After your transplant, it's possible that the walls of the arteries in your heart could thicken and harden, leading to cardiac allograft vasculopathy. This can make blood circulation through your heart difficult and can cause a heart attack, heart failure, heart arrhythmias or sudden cardiac death.
- Medication side effects. The immunosuppressants you'll need to take for the rest of your life can cause serious kidney damage and other problems.
- Cancer. Immunosuppressants can also increase your risk of developing cancer. Taking these medications can put you at a greater risk of skin and lip tumors and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, among others.
- Infection. Immunosuppressants decrease your ability to fight infection. Many people who have heart transplants have an infection that requires them to be admitted to the hospital in the first year after their transplant.
- Immediately before your transplant surgery
- A heart transplant usually needs to occur within four hours of organ removal for the donor organ to remain usable. As a result, hearts are offered first to a transplant center close by and then to centers within certain distances of the donor hospital.

*Getting the Call*

- The transplant center will provide you with a pager or cell phone to notify you when a potential heart is available. You must keep your cell phone or pager charged and turned on at all times.
- Once you're notified, you and your transplant team have limited time to accept the donation. You'll have to go to the transplant hospital immediately after being notified.
- As much as possible, make travel plans ahead of time. Some heart transplant centers provide private air transportation or other travel arrangements. Have a suitcase packed with everything you'll need for your hospital stay, as well as an extra 24-hour supply of your medications.
- Once you arrive at the hospital, your doctors and transplant team will conduct a final evaluation to determine if the donor heart is suitable for you and if you're ready for surgery. If your doctors and transplant team decide that either the donor heart or surgery isn't appropriate for you, you might not be able to have the transplant.

#### *The Procedure*

- Heart transplant surgery is an open-heart procedure that takes several hours. If you've had previous heart surgeries, the surgery is more complicated and will take longer.
- You'll receive medication that causes you to sleep (general anesthetic) before the procedure. Your surgeons will connect you to a heart-lung bypass machine to keep oxygen-rich blood flowing throughout your body.
- Your surgeon will make an incision in your chest. Your surgeon will separate your chest bone and open your rib cage so that he or she can operate on your heart.
- Your surgeon then removes the diseased heart and sews the donor heart into place. He or she then attaches the major blood vessels to the donor heart. The new heart often starts

beating when blood flow is restored. Sometimes an electric shock is needed to make the donor heart beat properly.

- You'll be given medication to help with pain control after the surgery. You'll also have a ventilator to help you breathe and tubes in your chest to drain fluids from around your lungs and heart. After surgery, you'll also receive fluids and medications through intravenous (IV) tubes.

*After the procedure*

- You'll initially stay in the intensive care unit (ICU) for a few days, then be moved to a regular hospital room. You're likely to remain in the hospital for a week or two. The amount of time spent in the ICU and in the hospital varies from person to person.
- After you leave the hospital, your transplant team will monitor you at your outpatient transplant center. Due to the frequency and intensity of the monitoring, many people stay close to the transplant center for the first three months. Afterward, the follow-up visits are less frequent, and it's easier to travel back and forth.
- You'll also be monitored for any signs or symptoms of rejection, such as shortness of breath, fever, fatigue, not urinating as much or weight gain. It's important to let your transplant team know if you notice any signs or symptoms of rejection or infection.
- To determine whether your body is rejecting the new heart, you'll have frequent heart biopsies in the first few months after heart transplantation, when rejection is most likely to occur. The frequency of necessary biopsies decreases over time.
- During a heart biopsy, a doctor inserts a tube into a vein in your neck or groin and directs it to your heart. The doctor runs a biopsy device through the tube to remove a tiny sample of heart tissue, which is examined in a lab.

- You'll need to make several long-term adjustments after you have had your heart transplant. These include:
- Taking immunosuppressants. These medications decrease the activity of your immune system to prevent it from attacking your donated heart. You'll take some of these medications for the rest of your life.
- Because immunosuppressants render your body more vulnerable to infection, your doctor might also prescribe antibacterial, antiviral and antifungal medications. Some drugs could worsen — or raise your risk of developing — conditions such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, cancer or diabetes.
- Over time, as the risk of rejection decreases, the doses and number of anti-rejection drugs can be reduced.
- Managing medications, therapies and a lifelong care plan. After a heart transplant, taking all your medications as your doctor instructs and following a lifelong care plan are vital.
- Your doctor might give you instructions regarding your lifestyle, such as wearing sunscreen, not using tobacco products, exercising, eating a healthy diet and being careful to lower your risk of infection.
- Follow all of your doctor's instructions, see your doctor regularly for follow-up appointments, and let your doctor know if you have signs or symptoms of complications.
- It's a good idea to set up a daily routine for taking your medications so that you don't forget. Keep a list of all your medications with you at all times in case you need emergency medical attention, and tell all your doctors what you take each time you're prescribed a new medicine.
- Cardiac rehabilitation. These programs incorporate exercise and education to help you improve your health and recover after a heart transplant. Cardiac rehabilitation, which

you might start before you're released from the hospital, can help you regain your strength and improve your quality of life.

### **A Surge: Notes on Terminal Lucidity**

**\*\*Emma has a “surge” and she just knows it’s the end so she calls the nurse in and asks for them to test for the organ donation, and she asks for a pen and paper.\*\***

- Terminal lucidity, rally before death or end-of-life rally, refers to an unexpected return of mental clarity and memory, or suddenly regained consciousness that occurs in the time shortly before death in patients suffering from severe psychiatric or neurological disorders.

#### *Annotated Health Research Bibliography*

“End-of-Life Rallying: What Is Terminal Lucidity?” Crossroads Hospice: End-of-Life Family *Care Services*, <https://www.crossroadshospice.com/hospice-palliative-care-blog/2019/july/16/end-of-life-rallying-what-is-terminal-lucidity/>

This article is a closer look at the mystery and commonness of ‘Terminal Lucidity.’ It also provided many other sources to continue my investigation into the terms of terminal lucidity and ‘surges.’ It even confirmed my own curiosities, explaining that oftentimes patients who experience terminal lucidity often are aware of their predicament and know that they are about to die.

I will be using information gained from this article to better explore the terminal lucidity that Emma will experience towards the end. Particularly the fact that she will ‘wake up’ with the impending feeling of her death and thus know what she needs to do.

“Heart Transplant - Mayo Clinic.” *Mayo Clinic - Mayo Clinic*, 16 Nov. 2019,

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/heart-transplant/about/pac-20384750>.

This is an extremely detailed look into the process of heart transplants. What goes into a heart transplant, what conditions deem a heart transplant necessary, the process of heart transplant, and the recovery of a heart transplant and future outlook.

This will help me write the medical nitty gritty parts of the ending of my novel. One of the most important parts of this article were the recovery sections. This will help me figure the physical pain that Cale will be in after his surgery to go hand and hand with the emotional pain he will also be going through.

“Matching Donors and Recipients.” *Organ Donor*, 22 June 2020,

[www.organdonor.gov/about/process/matching.html](http://www.organdonor.gov/about/process/matching.html).

This article is pivotal to my writing. This webpage is all about how the decisions are made about who gets which organs and when. Blood type, body type, etc are all extremely important to heart transplants and organ transplants in general.

I will be using this information throughout the novel. I needed to know what makes a good heart match, what the surgery is like, and how the donation decisions are made. I want Emma’s heart to go to Cale and this article helped me see how it could be possible to create such a situation.

Matloff, Judith. “The Mystery of End-of-Life Rallies - The New York Times.” *The New York Times -*

*Breaking News, US News, World News and Videos*, 24 July 2018,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/24/well/the-mystery-of-end-of-life-rallies.html>.



This article is all about ‘End-of-Life-Rallies’ and the really important thing about this article in particular is told through anecdotes and personal stories which is incredibly helpful to the story that I want to tell. Through explicit examples of what is seen when people have these surges I can write better moments.

- I knew what I wanted to happen, but I needed to know if it could happen in reality. I had first learned of terminal lucidity from Grey’s Anatomy so I knew I needed some better sources. This article is pivotal because it helps me to know what can actually occur in the real world and work my Emma scenes in accordance with that.

*Recipe, back story, and How it’s Integrated Into the Narrative*

## **Recipe**

### *BACON MAC AND CHEESE RECIPE*

1 pound bacon (diced)

#### MACARONI

4 quarts water

1 pound elbow macaroni

1 Tablespoon salt

#### CHEESE SAUCE

6 Tablespoons flour (all-purpose)

4 Tablespoons butter (divided use)

4 cups of milk

1 cup heavy whipping cream

1 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon cracked black pepper

¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes

2 cups Colby Jack Cheese (shredded)

2 cups sharp cheddar cheese (shredded)

½ cup mozzarella (shredded)

#### INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Preheat the oven or grill. Preheat your oven or grill to 425 degrees F.
2. Cook the macaroni. In a large pot bring 4 quarts of water to a boil over high heat. Add 1 Tablespoon salt and the macaroni noodles to the water and stir to prevent the noodles from sticking. Cook according to package directions, then drain.
3. Cook the bacon. In a large skillet, cook the bacon until crisp. Remove the bacon with a slotted spoon and drain on a paper towel. Do not drain the bacon grease.
4. Make the roux. Add 2 Tablespoons butter, the hot bacon grease and stir until melted. Add in the 6 Tablespoons flour and cook over medium heat for 5-6 minutes or until the flour has begun to brown.
5. Finish making the cheese sauce. Add in the milk and heavy whipping cream to the roux, and return to a boil. Turn off the heat and stir in the salt, cracked black pepper, and red pepper flakes.
6. Add the cheese to the sauce. Reserve 1/2 cup of each of the jack and cheddar cheeses and set aside with the mozzarella. Stir the rest of the jack and cheddar cheese into the sauce, and whisk until the cheese is melted.
7. Combine the noodles and the cheese sauce. After draining the cooked noodles, return them to the large pot. Pour the cheese sauce over the noodles and stir in half of the cooked bacon.

8. Transfer the mac and cheese to a baking dish. Use the remaining 2 Tablespoons of butter to coat the sides and bottom of a 9x13 baking dish. You can also cook this in a 12" cast iron skillet. Pour the mac and cheese from the large pot into the baking dish. Top with the remaining jack, cheddar, and mozzarella cheese and sprinkle on the remaining bacon crumbles.
9. Bake the bacon mac and cheese. Place the bacon mac and cheese in the oven or on the grill for 20 minutes or until the sides are bubbling and the cheese is melted and starting to brown.

### **Backstory**

- Cale's mom calls the recipe her "Comfort Casserole" and everyone who knows Cale's mom *knows* her Comfort Casserole. Cale doesn't really know the history of the casserole, but Cale's Mom, Kathy (short for Kathrine), created it on accident when she was prepping for breakfast the next morning and accidentally mixed it in with instant mac and cheese she was making for dinner when she for her newly married husband Frank. Over the years she fine-tuned it until it became the beloved Comfort Casserole that everyone loves.

### **Story Integration**

- It is first mentioned on page 92. Cale decided to use the recipe to bake Emma the casserole to help her fight off her migraine. Cale cooks the recipe with his best friend Max's help in his barely used dorm kitchen.

### *Description of POV*

- This novel will have two main POVs; they will alternate every other chapter, Emma then Cale. There will also be five vignettes that will either be told from an omniscient narrator

or a short story protagonist. The point of view will also be in the limited third person and in the past tense.

### *Centrifugal Event*

The culminating event of my novel will begin with Emma's terminal injury and her decision to donate her heart to Cale. She will have a head injury similar to a subdural hematoma that will put her in a coma until she experiences a surge/terminal lucidity. In these last hours of alertness, she writes a letter to her family and to Cale as she asks the nurses to run any necessary tests to confirm that she is a match for Cale. She has confirmed a match and after she dies, Cale gets a call. The remainder of the novel will be from his perspective as he goes into surgery, recovers from surgery, and learns the truth of his heart's origins. Until it then resolves, with both Cale and the deceased Emma having found peace in their conflicts.

This event should take place around page 260. The narrative style of writing will also shift and change in these final moments to better emphasize the emotions and feelings of the characters.

APPENDIX

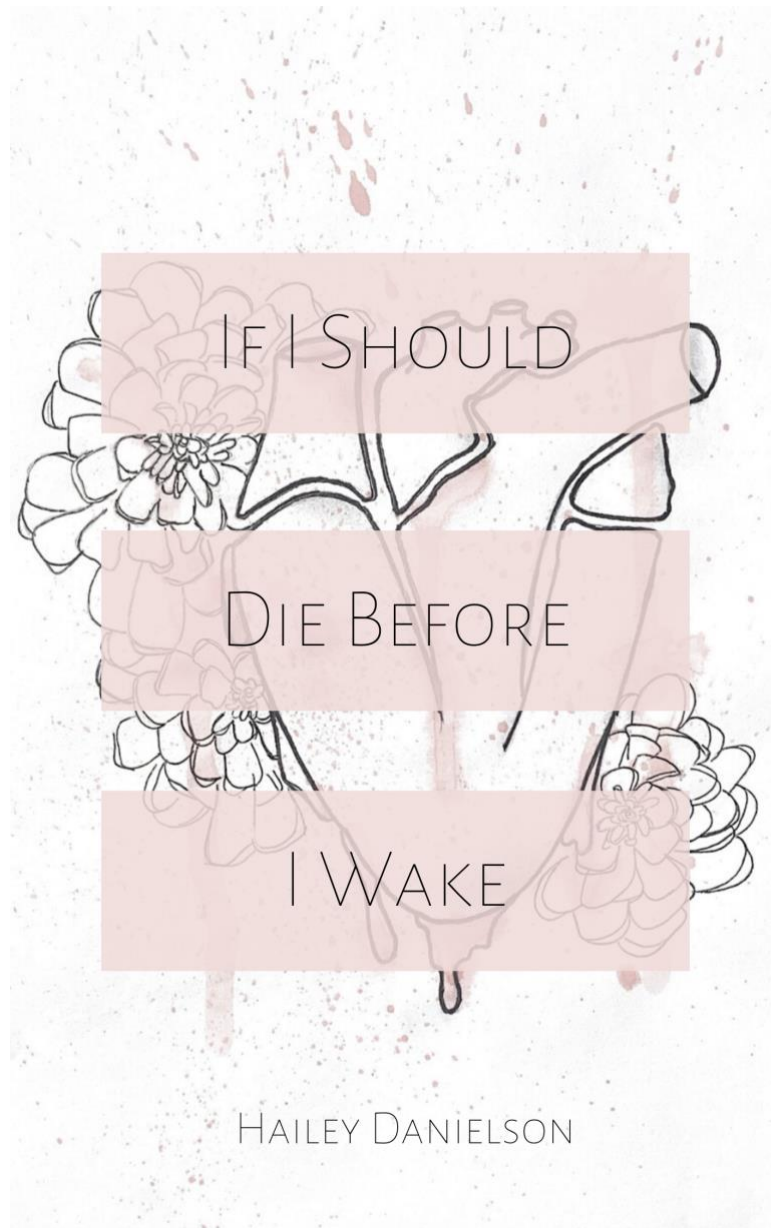


Fig 1. Tentative Cover, original art by Hailey Danielson

HE WAS SCARED OF BELIEVING IN A  
FUTURE HE MIGHT NEVER HAVE.

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CALE LOST ALL HOPE. EMMA IS LOST. BUT WHEN FATE KEEPS PUSHING THE TWO  
TOGETHER THEY GET A CHANCE TO FIND THE ANSWERS THEY'VE BEEN  
SEARCHING FOR. CAN CALE LEARN TO LIVE? CAN EMMA FIND HER PATH?  
TOGETHER THEY JUST MIGHT.

LOVE, GRIEF, AND HEALING ALL COME TOGETHER TO CREATE THE STORY OF CALE  
MARTIN AND EMMA DAVIS. *IF I SHOULD DIE BEFORE I WAKE* IS A NOVEL ABOUT  
LEARNING WHAT IT MEANS TO FIND YOURSELF AND ACCEPT THE TRUTH NO  
MATTER HOW DIFFICULT AND PAINFUL IT MIGHT BE.

---

*Praise for*

## IF I SHOULD DIE BEFORE I WAKE

"A HEARTBREAKING TALE OF FATE AND LOVE WITH  
CHARACTERS THAT WILL GRAB HOLD OF YOUR HEART AND  
NEVER LET YOU GO"  
RYAN RACINEZ *IMMORTAL*

"POETICALLY TRAGIC AND HOPELESSLY FUNNY, *IF I SHOULD  
DIE BEFORE I WAKE* IS A TRULY EXCELLENT ROMANCE THAT  
REVOLVES AROUND THE IDEA OF DESTINY AND FATED LOVE"  
KATERINA EXCELL *CRYSTAL KNOWLEDGE*.

"AN ENTHRALLING STUDY OF THE HEART'S PHYSICAL AND  
EMOTIONAL ROLE — **EXPANSIVE, PASSIONATE, AND  
HAUNTINGLY BITTERSWEET** — *IF I SHOULD DIE BEFORE I  
WAKE* TUGS AT THE HEARTSTRINGS OF ITS CHARACTERS  
AND AUDIENCE ALIKE."  
NICHOLAS GOUDSMIT *MARGOU*



Fig. 2 Tentative Back Cover Design ft. blurbs from HONOR 3850 2021-22 peers

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