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人 ONE 人

“Shit.” I jumped back from the stove. The small table rattled behind me as my ass barreled into it. The orange juice shook and settled in the glass set next to empty plates. The floral pattern on them faded from years of use. I stuck my finger into my mouth and ran my tongue across the sting. The grease popped another warning, and I turned down the fire under the bacon.

“Turn down... that damn fire...going to burn... my whole house down.” My mother’s growling voice meandered down the stairs and through the hallway to my ears. It reached me with less volume but ample bite. My mother. I could see her curling her lip in disgust. Head shaking.

“My dad’s house actually,” I said to the bacon – not more than a whisper. I tried to keep my sarcasm to a minimum for my dad’s sake.

I scraped the eggs out of the skillet onto the plates and left the bacon in a strainer in the sink. As I grabbed dull silver forks from the drawer, I could hear a door open down the hall. I quickened my pace. Waffles out of the toaster. Syrup on the table. Bacon on the plates. I sat down as the footsteps neared. Dammit. Pepper. I leaped up, and one giant step got me to the cabinet. I pulled the pepper shaker out and set it on the table. I plopped back into my seat. The juice shook.

I glanced up at the clock. 7:16. His footsteps fell on the creaky floorboards down the hall. My father, he was like clockwork every morning. Showered and dressed by 7:15 for breakfast. Took him about twelve minutes to finish his food before he grabbed his lunch out of the fridge and was out the door to work. Every day.

“Mmm. What we got today?” He rounded the corner. I smiled and cleared my throat. I took on the persona of a polished Southern Belle.

“Well, today, sir, we have a fine selection of Canadian bacon and eggs fresh from the coop.” He plopped down in the only other chair at the tiny table.

“I do declare, you have outdone yourself, Lady Bri.” He grabbed a piece of bacon, and I followed suit. We lifted the pieces in the air and let them touch briefly before devouring them. The minor burn to my finger was worth it. I smiled as he reached for another piece.

“So, what’s up for today?” He scooped a pile of eggs into his mouth.

“Chemistry quiz. And I have a presentation for English.” I glanced down at my backpack. *Did I pack my notes?*

“Okay. You’ve got this. Just focus. Make eye contact and slow down when you talk,” he coached as he pointed at me with a half-eaten piece of waffle. I focused on the eggs and nodded.

“You know your stuff, Bri. Just gotta convince yourself of that.”

“I know, Dad.” I didn’t know. Not really anyway. But I’d pretend for him. He nodded and took a swig of juice.

“The nurse needs to leave early today, so try to get here,” he told me. My eyes rolled into my head and back down to the plate in front of me. I shook my head and sighed.

“Won’t Chris be here?” I asked. He shoved more eggs in his mouth and met my gaze.

“No. He works tonight.”

I didn’t respond. Mostly because any words that came out of my mouth would be rude. Harsh. I bit my lip in a physical attempt to disable my mouth. He put his fork down.

“She’s your mother.” His plea fell on deaf ears.

“Your choice, not mine.”

“Bri, cut it out.” I was upsetting him. He rolled up his sleeves and leaned back. Breakfast was over. I glanced at the clock. 7:26. He’d be heading out soon. I sighed deeply.

“I’ll be here.” I extended a small olive branch in an attempt to salvage our breakfast. It was all I could give. I glanced up at the ceiling. I could see her lying up there – attached to her machines and detached from the world. Separate but among us still. Just the way she always seemed to prefer it. What was so bad about her reality? If she wanted to escape so badly, why did she keep coming back?

“Thank you. I love you.” He got up and made the short trip to my side of the table. He kissed the side of my face. His aftershave seeped into my nostrils.

“Love you too.” He strode toward the front door and grabbed his work bag. The sun broke through the door’s windowpane, casting golden streaks across him. He put his hand on

the doorknob but stopped.

“Remember to slow down. You’re in control when you’re up there okay?”

“Control. Got it.” I threw a quick smile and a thumbs up in his direction.

He smirked and was out the door a minute later. I tidied up the dishes, tossing our exchange around in my mind. It mirrored so many of our previous conversations. Him pushing and hoping that I would tap into some sense of obligation to her that I never really understood.

Since I can remember, my mother had either been gone or as good as gone. When she was around, she was confined to the room upstairs, recovering from a sickness caused by the torture she put her body through. She seemed stuck in a cycle of trying to end her life with my dad trailing behind her continuously trying to save it. For a long time, it was confusing and heartbreaking. Now, I was just numb.

It wasn't always like this. I could hear my dad's voice. He had a habit of venturing into our storage closet ever so often. Whenever things were really bad, he'd haul out a photo album that had seen better days and sit down beside me. The pages turned, and he traveled back in time. Me a smiling baby. A woman whose eyes were like mine holding me proudly. At the beach. On a road trip. Apparently, we did things. Went places. She wasn't always an unmoving resident of the upstairs bedroom. I think he showed me the album to heal a place in him, to remind him that there was someone in there. Someone worth holding onto. Someone I'd never met. To me, the trip down memory lane was depressing. Like showing someone a home they could never live in. A meal they could never eat. “How did a woman with so much joy become the living dead – angry and bitter?” I'd ask him.

“Life,” he'd say. The book would shut after that, back into the closet until things got bad again.

The doorbell croaked. It'd been broken for years and made more of a gurgling noise instead of a cheery ding dong. I turned off the water. I got distracted and now the sink was nearly overflowing. A glance at the clock let me know that I had to be at school soon. The dishes would have to wait. I pulled out the plug before I headed into the living room. Heavy faux lace cream curtains hung in front of the window doing a terrible job of actually blocking anything. I could see straight out onto the front stoop. My mother's home attendant, Sharon, stood outside. A light sweater over her scrubs. She waved, and I shot her a quick smile.

“Reporting for duty.” Sharon stepped inside and put her purse down on the couch.

“Gosh, I'm sorry.” I gave her a sincere, sad face. She giggled and headed into the

kitchen to start her routine. I grabbed my backpack from the floor near the door.

“Have a good day and good luck! Remember to slow down. You talk too fast.” Sharon pointed a stern finger at me before starting upstairs. I looked up the staircase as Sharon in her scrubs with little Bart Simpson’s on them grew smaller. The low hum of the oxygen machine persisted. I tried to, for a moment, envision the smiling woman in the pictures up there, coming out of that room to give me a hug and see me off for the day. But she wouldn’t be.

“I’ll remember.” I shut the door behind me.

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My feet rained down on the wooden planks as I pumped my arms. It felt good to run. I pushed myself and passed a few of my classmates as we lapped the gym. It was easy to zone out during these times. The sweat dripped from my body and muscles contracted and released on their own accord. Control. Over and over again. Control. My dad’s words echoed in my head. Control changed things. Changed outcomes. Changed circumstances.

I whizzed past the slowest girl in our class for the second time. I could feel her eyes on me. Her vulnerability. I ran harder and further away. The awkward uneven thump of her shoes on the pavement faded behind me and I pushed a bit more. I rounded the court near the benches and heard a few giggles. The girls. The girls who thought it was not cute to run or sweat had figured out a number of excuses to get out of doing anything physical. Headaches, big boobs, and menstrual cycles were the most popular excuses. All of which I dealt with but I always kept moving and kept pushing into the pain. My left side had been giving me warning cramps since second period but I pushed. Being cute was not important enough for me to fail a class. I needed to graduate at the top of my class in order to move out and start fresh. I needed a new place. New surroundings.

“All right! Bring it in!” Mr. Doyle blew his whistle as I breezed past him. I slowed my pace and made my way back over.

“Good hustle. Not sure why you never joined track and field.” I smiled and wiped my brow. It wasn’t the first time he’d put me on the spot. He’d been trying to get me to join the

team since my freshman year. I always gave some excuse. That I didn't do it to compete, I just enjoyed running. That school assignments were overwhelming and I needed to focus. That my knee had been giving me problems and I didn't want to stress it. All lies really. Track and field meant early morning practices which meant missed breakfasts with my dad who worked overtime late into the evening. It meant after school practices that would leave no one to watch after my mother. It meant away games that no one could take me to or be in the stands for.

"Maybe next lifetime," I said with a shrug. He looked like he had a reply geared up but I was saved by the bell. The rest of the class closed in around us.

"For those of you who didn't participate today, next week is your last chance to complete your Phys Ed eval. If you don't, I will fail you. Don't make me fail you. I've seen enough of you this year so I don't want to see you next year. Only excuses accompanied by a doctor's note will be accepted."

"Damn," someone whispered loudly behind me. The class giggled and I looked over my shoulder. A group of guys snickered while one guy, who I don't recall seeing before today, desperately tried to keep a straight face.

"Nice one." Mr. Doyle shot the offender a look and continued on with his announcements. I lingered on the unfamiliar face in the rows of students. We were halfway through the school year, but I knew that his face was new to me. I faced forward and thought hard. I don't get to hang around school much after hours. I don't get to attend the games and pep rallies. But I thought I had a pretty good recall of everyone in the school. Mostly through my personable younger brother, Chris. But I didn't know him. Against my better judgment I peeked over my shoulder again. He was looking right at me. He was solid. Would probably be considered overweight if it weren't for his height. He had the other guys in the class by at least four inches. His tawny skin was smooth and stretched down over muscular legs right down to his neat sneakers. I surveyed his face. Strong jawline and full lips under a thin mustache. His eyes though were childlike. Soft. Almost naive. How did he manage to keep that look?

"OK, get out." Mr. Doyle blew his whistle again and the class was over.

"Can't you slack off just once and join the cult?" Rita jogged up next to me. It was the only running I witnessed her do all day. Rita and I met freshman year when we collided in the lunchroom. Both distracted and confused by this huge place. I apologized profusely, my lips going a mile a minute but she just laughed and shrugged it off. We helped one another blot the milk out of our t-shirts and we've stayed connected ever since.

"I intend for my senior year to be my last year. Feel free to do a victory lap if you'd like,"

I warned her.

“I’ll get out here one way or another. Believe that.”

I wouldn’t put it past her. She’d made it this far. She was super smart, especially in math, but completely lazy. We neared the locker room and waited for the line of girls to stream in. I glanced back around the gym and spotted him. He’d hung back wrapped in a conversation with Mr. Doyle.

“Easy on the eyes right.” Rita winked and inched forward in the line.

“Has he been around all year?” I squinted and craned my neck a bit to get a look at his eyes again.

“Nope, he’s a newbie. He’s actually pretty nice. Have a few classes with him.” He moved freely. More comfortable in his own skin than I’d seen anyone our age be. He somehow avoided the nervous jerky movements common in these awkward teen years. I wanted to inch closer. He glanced my way without breaking his conversation with Coach Doyle. I turned quickly and slammed into Rita.

“Nice to see you again!” she said sarcastically. My head dropped.

“Let’s go.” I placed a hand on her shoulder and marched her forward into the locker room.

“Good. That was getting awkward,” Rita whispered into my ear before trailing off into the locker room.

“That’s my life.”

A laugh reel blared from the TV as it cast a glow across the dark room. I pulled myself from the deep fog sleep. One of those slumbers when you don’t remember falling asleep but here you are. Waking. I pulled myself up in bed and heard papers rustle at my feet. Ah, yes. I remember now. Being poor put me to sleep. The sleep of the poor is like no other. It holds hope that when you wake you’ll miraculously be able to afford something. Papers spread all over. A calculator dangling precariously off the side of the bed. Held in place only by some gathered

blanket.

My acceptance letters from the colleges I'd applied to came into today. I'd applied early. Beyond eager to know if I'd be able to get the hell out of this house in the fall or not. Well, I'd gotten in and now I was knee deep in financial aid hell. Adding and subtracting. Hoping and cursing. None of it made money magically appear.

My shirt clung to my breasts with sweat. The energy it took to swing my legs over the side of the bed caused more beads of salty perspiration to pop up on my forehead. It was early January and though it was cold outside, it did not warrant the eighty-degree mandatory thermostat setting our house was on. It wouldn't be long before one of us passed out in this living hell. But we dealt with it. Gritted our teeth and wiped our brows incessantly for my mother. Her body was completely unable to regulate its own temperature. It was a side effect that makes sense when you consider a lifetime of ingesting crude substances.

It was after seven in the evening. I shuffled out of bed and opened my bedroom door. The hallway was dark and the sun was long gone. Our usually vibrant Brooklyn neighborhood was quiet. Everyone hibernating for the rest of the winter. As New Yorkers, we got all four seasons and only one of them was consistent enough to actually venture out in.

I made my way down the hallway into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror. I looked as sticky as I felt. I grabbed a rag and let cold water sink into it before sliding it across my face and over the back of my neck. Temporary relief was all I needed. I opened the medicine cabinet and grabbed the pillbox. Sunday through Saturday. I popped open the Thursday flap and emptied the remaining pills into my palm.

The kitchen was clean and empty. Sharon must have tidied up before her shift was over. I opened the cabinet and grabbed a glass. Flipped on the faucet and let the water run for a bit before filling it up. Same time every day. Same three pills. I made my way to the stairs. The hum of the oxygen machine grew louder as I neared the landing. I turned the knob and entered the room. The TV was always on the same channel. Reruns of old shows. She never got tired of them.

She was on her side with her back to me. Her curly hair strewn across the pillows. I crept a bit closer. I wondered each time I entered this room if I'd find her...gone. Living with a sick person had a way of making you a bit matter-of-fact about life or death. I knew CPR. Who to call. How to react. It wasn't *if*. It was when.

"Your medicine." I neared the head of the bed. Her tiny head peaked out from under the covers. Her eyes stayed trained on the TV. *Who's the Boss?* was on.

“Set it down.” I cleared a space on the cluttered side table and set down the water and the pills. The room was small. It was hard to believe my father and her shared this room once. They must have been on top of one another. Maybe they wanted it that way back then. But after an especially nasty argument between them a few years back --she’d checked herself out of rehab after only ten days-- she kicked him out. He took up residence in Chris's room downstairs. Chris moved to the basement. I watched the shift from my room. My dad hasn’t slept in here since.

I lingered.

“You need something?” I asked.

“No,” she said. Her voice was gravel. Too deep for such a tiny woman. She tugged at the plastic tubes in her nose. I waited. Tony Danza chattered on in the background. The covers crept down off her frame as she pulled herself into a sitting position. I watched as she grabbed the pills and slowly put them in her mouth. One by one. Then the water. I watched her grimace as she swallowed.

“Are you hungry?” I took the glass from her hands.

“No. Sharon left food in the fridge.” I nodded and again...waited. She stared off toward the TV, avoiding eye contact. We’d played this same game for months. Me trying my best to be a good daughter. Take care of her. Make sure she took her pills. Make sure she ate. Make sure I knew where her insurance cards were because god forbid we made a trip to the hospital without them. Another expense that we couldn’t afford.

“Just show me,” I said. I had other things to get on with today. I was not in the mood. She huffed and opened her mouth. I peeked inside of her mouth for traces of the little white pills. I saw none so I retreated. I closed the door behind me and stood there a moment. I could hear the sheets ruffle as she settled back into the same position.

I jogged downstairs and poured the rest of the water into the sink before washing it. 7:37 glared at me in bright green numbers from the microwave. My dad would be home soon. I’d heat up his dinner for him before he came in. I’d cut him a thick slice of pound cake and warm it for a few seconds in the microwave. A huge scoop of vanilla ice cream on top would put him in the right frame of mind to discuss college. More specifically paying for college.

I went over what I’d say to him. Explain that it was an investment in the entire family if I went to college. After four years I’d have a degree and land a job that could really ease the weight on his shoulders. If he gave a little now it would benefit us all in the long run. Going to the local community college would not land me the jobs I needed to put us all in a better

position. And I'd worked hard in school. I deserved it.

Outside of Saturday mornings at the library, this was my favorite time of day. Back in my room, I grabbed a book and sat in my window seat to watch the world go by. I pulled a pack of Twizzlers from under the cushion and rested the book on my lap. People poured out of a bus after it rumbled to a stop on the corner. They ambled off in different directions, bundled against the cold. Deep chuckles rolled down the block from somewhere. My eyes searched the street for the source. I heard it again but this time a little closer. Two guys walked down the street. One bounced a basketball skillfully as the other guy talked with his hands, gesturing to emphasize his point before they both erupted into laughter. It was him. From school. The gym. I scrambled across the room to turn off the light. I could only imagine how pathetic I looked. Sweaty and lonely sitting in the window. I crept back from the window and lowered the blinds but continued to peer out through the slits. His long legs strode down the sidewalk. Weaving through people. His winter coat slightly unzipped. A smile on his face.

I exhaled deeply. I didn't know I was holding my breath. As they passed my window and continued down the street, a bead of sweat rolled down my back. They crossed the street and stood in front of a house three doors down. The two gave each other a brotherly hug before the other guy walked away. I struggled to remember the family who lived in that house before. It had been a while since I last saw them. Maybe a few months even. Yes. An older woman and her daughter lived there. I watched him pull a key from his pocket and enter the door. Even after he shut it I continued to look. Hoping to see something. What? I had no idea. I was all of a sudden really bothered that I didn't know his name. I was irked that I didn't know more about him. I searched the pillows for my phone before I spotted it on the desk next to my computer. I opened a text.

Me: What's his name?

Rita: Who?

Me: The guy. From gym.

Rita: Oooo. Yuri.

Me: He lives across the street from me.

Rita: No fair :-(

I smiled. Yuri. I let it play over in my head. I held it there. Let it linger. I heard a car pull up in front of the house and I looked out to see my dad emerging from his car. I put my book away and headed into the kitchen. As his plate circled in the microwave my mind spun as well. I

wondered how long Yuri had lived there. How long had I not noticed?

人 THREE 人

A small winter storm had rolled in and stolen the sun away behind thick clouds. The wind howled and the windows of my room shook. Doritos sprinkled down onto my chest as I scrolled through my phone. Bored with Instagram, I switched to Facebook. I was stuck in a loop. I checked the few alerts I had. Mostly updates from Rita. Rita with cat ears. Rita with googly eyes. The girl *was* social media. I laughed and liked the photos and then resumed scrolling. I briefly stopped on celebrity news. I skipped around for a bit until something caught my eye. *People You May Know*. I never typically knew any of the people but this time I saw a familiar face. Yuri, in a basketball uniform, filled the small circle of his profile photo. Crumbs from the cheese flavored tortilla chips dropped to my lap as I sat up. I clicked on his photo.

I scrolled through his timeline and felt a flutter in my stomach when I saw that he'd posted recently. It was a video. I surveyed my room like I was about to embark on a covert mission. Once I was satisfied I wasn't being surveilled, I clicked play on the video and watched as he did a few tricks with a soccer ball. The camera was unsteady but you could still see his finesse. The sun glinted off the ball as he balanced it on his foot before launching it into the air and sideswiping it. This wasn't today. There were no sun rays in sight today. It didn't even look like New York. A voice cheered him on. A kid's voice. My phone buzzed as a notification filled the banner of my screen. It was from Rita. I opened the message and saw a picture of her making a kissy face. She was still at school. I looked out of the window at the swirling storm. I was grateful again for my light schedule. Out of school by noon on most days. I smiled.

Rita: Look what I found.

Rita's kissy face filled the screen. She thought she'd discovered kissy faces? I'd hate to burst her bubble. I stared at the picture again trying to make sense of it. Still mostly Rita's face, but I could make out people behind her. I zoomed in. There he was. Yuri sitting a few rows away from her chatting away with someone.

Me: No fair.

Rita: I told you calculus is fun.

I hated math and after passing my final required course last year I refused to take any advanced courses. Rita aspired to go into the medical field so she took it. I wondered what he

wanted to do that would make him endure the class.

Me: I hate math.

Rita: He doesn't. He's really into this stuff. #nerd

I laughed but tossed the new information around in my head. It was ridiculous the way every new little piece of information lingered. What the hell was this? He didn't know me at all and I didn't know him. We'd only ever been in the same room twice. I had other things to focus on. Like paying for college. I made a mental note to stop by my guidance counselor's office sometime this week and get more information about financial aid and scholarships. The goal was to get away. Go off to college and start new. I tucked my phone back under the cushion and powered on my laptop. Back to business.

Later that evening, I'd managed to submit a few scholarship applications and was working on my speech to my dad. I'd chickened out yesterday as soon as he came home and didn't even bring the subject up. The house was quiet. Perfect atmosphere to get my head in the game. I'd speak to my dad tonight. Just snatch the tape off my mouth and say it. The doorbell sounded through the house. I hoped it wasn't our neighbor stopping by to borrow something she'd undoubtedly never return. I had begun to tell her we didn't have things. Cups? No sorry, we don't have any. Sugar? All out over here too. I crossed to the front door, my defense ready before opening it.

"Sup Bri?"

"Where's your key?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't be ringing the bell." My brother Chris stood in the doorway. Younger than me by eleven months but towering over me all the same. I stood firm in the doorway.

"What if I wasn't home?"

"You're always home. May I enter?" I narrowed my eyes at him. He narrowed his back at me. A shadow moved behind him.

“Who’s that?” I rose on my tiptoes to see. Chris continued his towering statue routine and blocked my view. I could barely see anything but I did make out the hand that was thrust out at me from behind my brother.

“I’m Jax. Nice to meet you, Bri.” A deep voice said. My brother shifted around me and entered the house. I shook the mystery person's hand as he stepped through the doorway. In the hallway light, I could see his face. I knew all of Chris's friends. They were mostly the same kids since our elementary school days. Not him. This one was new.

“Hi, Jack,” I said. He grinned still gripping my hand.

“Nah, not Jack. Jax.”

“Oh. Well, hi then... Jax.” I felt every part of me in front of him. The shirt clinging to my chest from our sweltering house. My damp hands becoming damper by the moment. My hair reaching in every direction imaginable. I released my grip on his hand and folded my arms across my chest.

“Be nice and let the fellow in.” Chris chirped from inside the house. I stepped aside and Jax entered and shook his head apologetically. I closed the door and followed, taking him in. Dark jeans, wrinkle-free t-shirt with horizontal white and blue stripes, blue bomber jacket, and white sneakers. Like new, no creases. A simple watch with a navy leather band and hair neatly cropped in a dark caesar. He smelled fresh. Like linen.

I entered the living room to find Chris in the corner adjusting the thermostat.

“Leave that. You know it can't be too cold in here.” I didn't try to stop him though. I wanted relief. As long as I could blame it on someone else.

“Nothing can kill that woman. Don’t worry.” He sunk into the couch and flicked on the TV. I glimpsed Jax. He seemed amused but kept his mouth shut. I checked the clock. It was time for my mom's meds. I went into the kitchen to retrieve the pills and water before making my way upstairs. I entered the room to find her sitting up in her chair. She looked better today. I saw that she’d managed to put her hair into a braid that snaked down the nape of her neck and rested on her shoulder. Or more likely, Sharon did it for her.

We spoke very little to one another as I gave her the pills and water. She didn’t put up a fight for me to check her mouth. She even threw me a ‘Thank You’. It was one of her good days. They were far and few between. I went back downstairs to the kitchen, turned on the tap and filled the sink. I wanted to square away the few stray dishes before my dad got home. I didn’t want him to come in and make a fuss about the kitchen being dirty and screw up his mood. I

needed him happy. I ran through my speech. I'd start by telling him that I got accepted to Columbia and that I was going. I'd ask for his support. I knew he couldn't do much financially but anything would help. I'd be firm. I would not let him guilt-trip me. I'd helped out all I could for years. I deserved this opportunity. I deserved it.

"You deserve what?" His voice came out of nowhere. I jolted and dropped a plate. It hit the side of the sink, cracked in two, and slipped into the water.

"Dammit," I said looking at the plate. Jax rushed over and removed his jacket before reaching into the soapy water and pulling out the pieces of plate.

"I'm sorry," he apologized as he sat the pieces on the counter and dried his hands on a towel. Before I knew it, he was in front of me and my hands were in his. He was staring at them attentively. Saying something. Words. I forced myself to hear what he was saying. I shook my head to clear the chatter.

"Did you cut yourself?" he repeated. I looked down at my hands and flipped them over and over again. No blood. No pain.

"No, I'm ok. I'm ok." I finally pushed the words out. I felt my throat tightening. I tried to pull myself together. I was just startled. Surprised by...him.

"I...I was just thinking..." I started to question his abrupt arrival and what he said. Like, he knew what was going on in my head. My hands were still in his.

"You were thinking out loud. Mouthing the words to yourself." He smiled and let my hands go. I put some distance between us and picked up the shattered plate.

"So you caught me talking to myself like a psycho. Sorry you had to experience that." I spent longer than I needed walking over to the trash bin and dropping the pieces inside.

"Nah. I'm the creepy one. Didn't mean to sneak up on you." I glanced back at him. He leaned against the opening to the kitchen. Completely comfortable in this awkward situation. My cheeks were on fire with embarrassment.

"It's alright." I shrugged and turned toward him. I felt him take inventory of me. Openly. I noticed for the first time that I was soaked with dishwater. Reflexively, my arms crossed over my chest and I made a break for the doorway. I inched by, angling myself to be sure I didn't accidentally graze him. I wondered too many times since meeting him what his skin felt like.

I darted into my room and went as far away from the door as I could. I sat in the window. Acceptance letters crumpling under my weight. The room felt stifling. I got up and

dragged the fan from the corner until it was in front of me. I leaned my face in until I could hear the blades chopping air in my ears. The sweat on my face started to dry. I felt my heart rate returning to normal.

I always did this. I always behaved like a goddamn idiot whenever the opposite sex was involved. What words do you say? All the articles online say to be yourself. Who was I? Adults were the problem. They spent our entire childhoods telling us to follow the rules. Only to let us get to the precipice of adulthood and turn the tables. Be creative. Think outside of the box. Be yourself. I raked my fingers through my curls. The only un-predictable thing about me was my hair.

I heard the keys at the front door. My dad was finally home. I plucked a dry loose fitting shirt from my drawer and switched out of my damp t-shirt. My room was clean except for the college letters that were now being blown to the floor by the fan. I picked up the one with the Columbia University insignia. I'd dreamed of going to this college since a campus visit in elementary school. I remember feeling small in their massive library, with rows upon rows of books to the ceiling waiting for me to borrow. The idea seemed unfathomable to me. You could just take books out of here? It was absurdly wonderful. I imagined myself sitting at the desks late into the night studying for exams. I made up friends that would be there with me. They were nice but a little offbeat. Like me.

There I'd figure *me* out. There I'd be sure. The knob on my door turned. I collected the rest of the papers quickly before I looked up to see my dad filling the doorway.

"Hey, baby girl."

"Hey. Good day?" I could hear the video games echoing behind him. I wondered if Jax was still around. My dad leaned against the door jam.

"Work was work and now it's done." He said this every day in a sing-song melody. I could smell the metal dust on his clothes. His jeans were stained with polish. My dad was a craftsman. He worked with his hands all day crafting beautiful pieces that lived in luxury high rises and elegant restaurants across the city. He was a master at it. I'd gone to his shop a few times over the years and watched him. My dad had a way of balancing his strength with a delicate touch. Metal was strong but when melted it was precarious. You had to know how hard you could push it and when to pull back. He told me that all my life. Usually on nights when he'd had a few brews and was feeling sentimental. He was talking about metal work but I always suspected that he was talking about something else entirely too.

"How was school?"

“Great.” I gripped the papers in my hand. I saw his eyes scanning the papers on the floor.

“What's all this?” He scooped up one of the papers and read them. He flipped it over and quickly glanced up at me. I fidgeted. Opened and closed my mouth. This was not how I rehearsed. I was supposed to sit across from him at the table. I was supposed to start the conversation. I had lines prepared. I had data to share. I felt my stomach churning. I swallowed hard. He picked up another paper.

“I got accepted into a few of the colleges I wanted to go to.”

“A few? Bri there's got to be ten letters here.” He was flipping through pages.

“Yeah, I wanted to talk to you about this one.” I handed him the crumpled and sweaty letter from Columbia and then plopped down on my bed.

“I know that we talked about me going to a community college...but I really want to go to Columbia, Dad. I know it's expensive but they gave me some financial aid and grants and the rest I can work and pay for with some help from you. Things are really tight around here but if I do well I can help. I can help all of us.” My eyes were starting to sting. I could feel the pressure building up behind them but I didn't want to cry. I didn't want to be a crying little girl. I wanted to be a clear-headed adult about this. I took a deep breath and pushed the emotions down.

He sat down on the bed next to me but kept his eyes on the paper.

“I missed this one, huh?” he asked me in a whisper. “I love you and your brother. But you know what I love most about you?” He paused for a second as I looked at him.

“You put others ahead of yourself.” He put his arms around my shoulder and pulled me next to him. His metallic scent rolled through the air around us, “I know this is hard. But we need to take care of Mom. For just a little while longer I need you here with me.” He said as I was nestled there under his arm. I felt the bottom drop out from under me. He still held the Columbia letter in his hand. I stared down at it until the crest became blurry in front of my eyes. The tears slid down. He hugged me tighter as one hot tear after another dropped onto his arm.

“Look at me, Bri. This is not forever. I almost have the shop fully operational. I'm training the guys so that I can take a step back and I'll be here to take care of Mom. You can go to whatever school you want. I know you'll do great. You're so smart, baby. Just give me a little more time. Please.” He looked me straight in my eye.

I didn't have any words to give him, so I just nodded. He pulled me in close again. My head hurt. He gave me one last apologetic look before getting up to leave. He closed the door

behind him. The fan resumed blowing the papers across the room. I picked them up one by one until they were stacked neatly in my hands. They felt heavy with the weight of my imagined future of friends, quirky ones, and the library filled with books to the ceiling.

Before I knew it, I was a crumpled heap on the floor. Soaking the pages. It was all coming out from the place I've held it inside all my life. I cried for every hospital visit with my dad while other kids played outside in the sprinklers. For all the times we sat in a hot house with no lights because my dad paid for high-priced rehab centers instead of the electric bill. The nights he dragged us across Brooklyn with him looking through every abandoned building before we found her passed out in a corner somewhere. For every time I looked in her face, those sunken cheeks, and vacant eyes and wondered if that was my future. They always said I looked just like my mother. Maybe I'd be just like her too.

There were two swift knocks on my door before it swung open.

"Ayo, Bri. We're going to grab a bite. You want--" Chris saw me lying on the floor. Jax directly behind him. His face filled with worry.

"Give me a minute, bro." Chris closed the door and got down on the floor with me.

"What happened?" he asked.

"College." The word croaked out. I finally released my hold on the stack of papers.

"You didn't get in? Fuck them. They're stupid. That's why I don't fuck with higher education, man. It's all part of the system to keep us locked in. I don't even--"

"I got in. Dad says I can't go...because of Mom," I said.

He went silent and dropped his head.

"I'm sorry, Bri. That ain't right."

"Yeah." I wiped the wetness from my nose. I pulled myself back from the pain. Back to numbness. We sat there for a while longer. I could imagine that he was running through his own highlight reel of our childhood in his head. A childhood that really wasn't one at all. Only he got away because he was a boy and couldn't perform all the tasks it took to care for mom. The changing clothes, the baths, and applications of cream on her sores. After being a part of her care for so long it just became natural for me to be the one to do it all.

"We're about to go grab some food. Come on. My treat. But don't get any expensive

shit.” He went over to the door. A withered chuckle escaped me.

“Alright. Let me change.” He opened the door and I caught a glimpse of Jax. He threw me a sympathetic smile. Had he heard?

“We’ll be outside.” Chris closed the door.

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