

ELLIPSIS

Homecoming

AN ELLIPSIS STORY
BY MILENA WESTARB



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MLW

Homecoming

An ELLIPSIS Story

By

Milena Westarb

A thesis presented for the B.A. Degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Spring, 2017

Readers

Keith Taylor and Gina Brandolino

For my father.

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Abstract.

Homecoming follows the lives of three college students, Elle, Nate and Keon, as they encounter the difficulties of growing up. Nate is a college hockey player whose promising future in the professional world of the sport is interrupted by a catastrophic injury that left him paralyzed from the waist down. Keon, Nate's old arch rival, now carries a secret that has robbed him of peace for years. Elle wakes up with no memory of who she is or where she came from, and is forced to rebuild and rediscover what it means to be herself. But there's a catch: each of them also discovers supernatural abilities that change their lives in ways for which they could never have prepared. Four years later, they have no choice but to learn how to depend on each other when life and super powers become too much to take on alone.

Homecoming is the prose-adapted prequel to a larger sequential art project intended to be presented as a series of graphic novels called ELLIPSIS.

do the planets remember
how they were born?

'COURSE NOBODY **KNOWS**.
IT'S SOMETHING BEYOND HUMAN
UNDERSTANDING.

I BARELY HAVE A HANDLE
ON MY OWN MEMORIES,
LET ALONE **THEIRS**.

STILL. SOMETIMES I FEEL
LIKE THEY KNOW
SOMETHING WE DON'T.

A SECRET.

OR MAYBE
AN **INSIDE JOKE**.

YOU KNOW?

AM I A **PLANET**?

NOPE.

BUT LET'S BE HONEST.

FOR ALL I KNOW,
I COULD BE .

maybe that's part of the joke too.

FOUR YEARS AGO...

PLANET EARTH



ANYWAY, I KEEP HOPING
SOMETIME I'LL FIGURE IT OUT.

ANAGRAM CITY



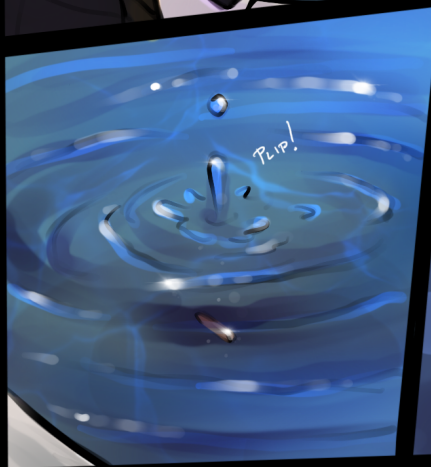
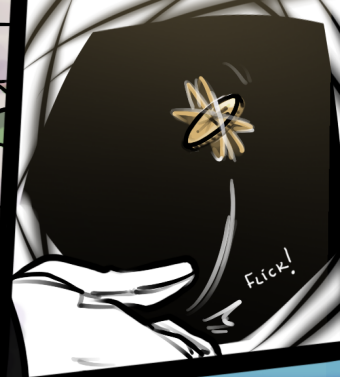
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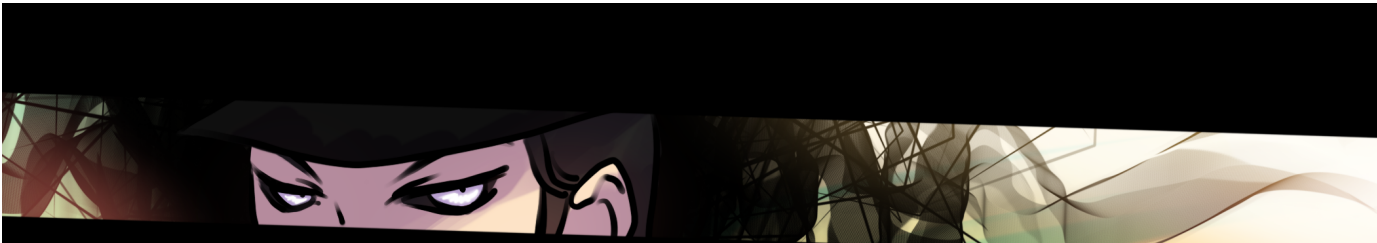
OF COURSE, COMPLETE
AMNESIA TENDS TO MAKE
THINGS DIFFICULT.

WHAT I DO REMEMBER
MAKES NO SENSE.

WHAT I DON'T
FEELS SO **OBVIOUS**.



LIKE I'M THE ONLY
ONE WHO MISSED
THE PUNCHLINE.

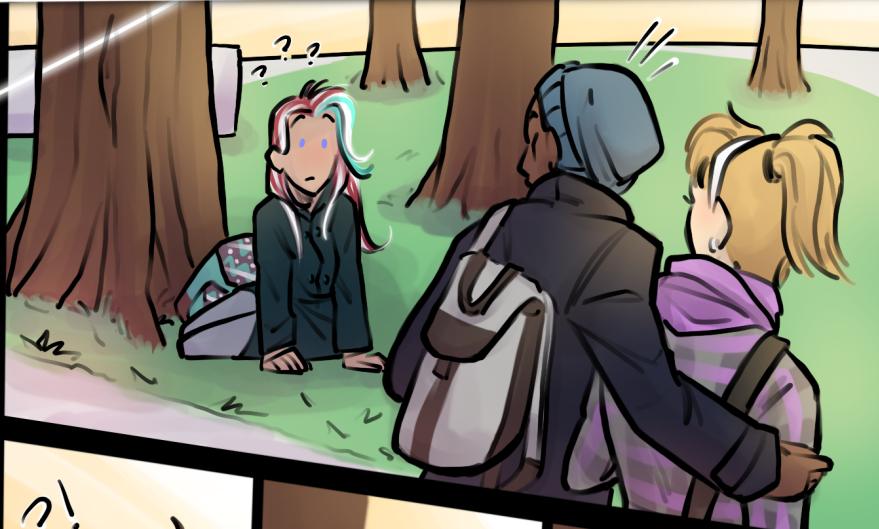


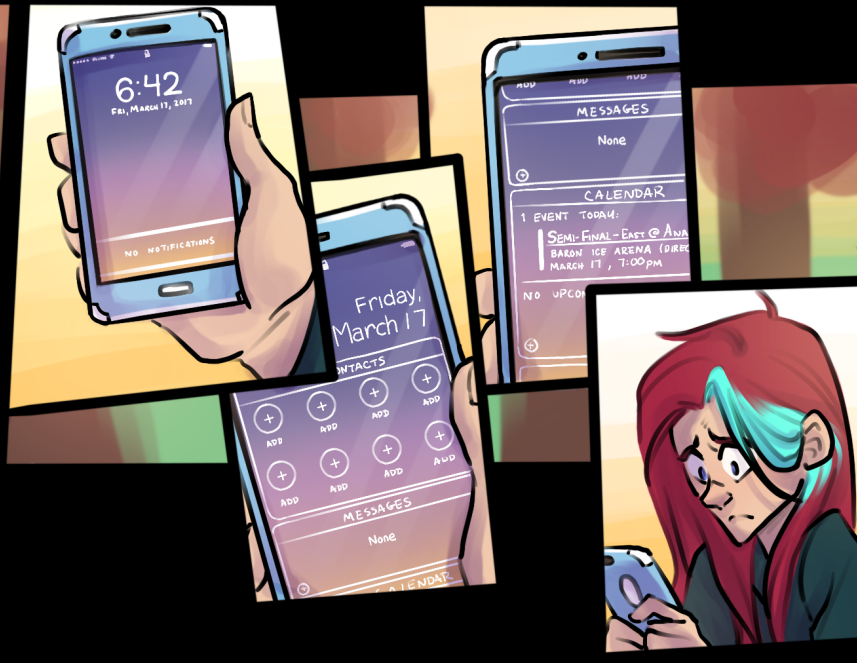
I FOUND WHAT I WAS LOOKING FOR EVENTUALLY,

BUT IT DIDN'T GO DOWN THE WAY I THOUGHT IT WOULD.

TO SAY SOMETHING OF EXPECTATION WHEN YOU HAVE NO CLUE WHO YOU ARE...

YEAH, I CAN SEE HOW THAT COULD BE PROBLEMATIC.





OK... WEIRD...



MY NAME IS ELLE DURANT, AND YOU'RE NOT GONNA BELIEVE A WORD OF THIS.



Homecoming.

An ELLIPSIS Story

By

Milena Westarb

Zoning out is vacationing out of your head with three seconds left, when you've got the puck on your tape nine feet from the slot and you realize you're not going to make it. You're with it just long enough to latch onto the most colorful thing in range—the logo on the d-man's jersey—and then just sail away.

You're aware during this, sure. You can have all kinds of thoughts:

"Man, that is one huge son of a bitch."

"His mother must have been in labor for a week."

"Did E-Lan fucking dig this guy out of the fucking ground?"

"Fuck me."

"I'd rather sprint head first into the side of a barn."

You can't stop the hit from coming, and neither should you. You can win this. You can. Five feet from the crease and you could spear one on the goalie's weak glove if your last ten years of karma are spotless, you called your mother at some point this month, and God is a merciful God. Zoning out is becoming so aware that you think about literally everything to keep from thinking about how much it's gonna hurt. Nowhere to pass. King Kong practically already murdering your shadow. You think stupidly that the replay for this is gonna look fucking spectacular, and hey, it probably won't be your face.

0:01. Let it rip. Red light means go.

| *Nate.*

Possibility scares me. I'm too technical for it. It's yes or no, right or wrong, in or out. I never know what to do with "in between." Things are just easier when you've got point A and point B, and to get from one to the other all you've gotta do is skate. Walk. Wheel.

Sometimes I forget I'm two limbs short of a set, but that's because I don't feel much different than I did before. I can still move, can't I? I can still get where I need to be.

I used to have to be everywhere at once, or at least have a clear idea of how to put myself anywhere on the ice as fast as possible, which meant virtually always being "in between." I had to read the unreadable. I had to know what'd happen on the ice before it did. And I was good at it. I knew where every guy was, where his next stride would put him. It was way beyond keeping track of the puck. No, the puck follows the bodies. You have to keep track of the bodies—where they are, where they aren't, and when those spaces'll switch. Somewhere in that mess was my point B, and it wasn't just skill that got me to it. Or talent. Or will. My guys said it was some freakish sixth sense. I'm no Gretzky. I'm just fucking terrified of losing track of where I need to end up.

That fear, my coaches said, is what made me good at what I did. People were always so impressed. I didn't know how to explain it at the time, but every single game was the same God-damn thing. Over and over. Hockey's just a bigger, faster, more violent game of connect-the-dots. I didn't have to explain it. I just did it. GMs, reporters, coaches, and teammates have asked

me more times than I can count: “Kyle, what’s the secret to your game?” I didn’t really have an answer. It’s kind of that twisted rush of terror and curiosity you get when you wonder what it’d be like to jump off a cliff, but then you actually do it. Fear isn’t something people tend to *enjoy*, right. It’s fear. But I lived for hockey, I lived for the way I had to spend my warm-up doing laps to stop my legs from shaking, and I lived for the fact that no matter how many games I played I never got used to it.

It’s been four years since I’ve been to the Baron and even though my legs will never shake again, I get a weird feeling like they would be. If I could stand up without a machine, I’d be doing laps over the fresh ice, so mirror-like it’s almost a shame. You can count the lights on it. The sun coming in from the east windows washes the entire place in orange just like this for just a few minutes, and for those few minutes it’s not ice you’re looking at down there at all. There’s a reason they call losing at the Baron “drowning in the Sea of Fire.” There’s a reason the Phoenix logo at center ice has a wingspan thirty feet across. The slant of the bleachers opens under the dome like the walls of a cauldron. The black space above the lights probably goes on forever; nobody’s ever been able to shoot a puck high enough to hit anything and even if they ever do, the ascent will be soundless. You could lose your mind here when it’s empty, like it is now, listening to the ventilators and the sound of your skates and the in and out of your own breaths. You can lose it packed in here with eight thousand people rumbling the bleachers drowning out the band and the announcer and everything outside these walls. You don’t just play hockey in a place like this. You *exist* in a place like this.

I shiver and lean back in my chair, watching my breath cloud over my head and disappear. I’ll never get used to this. And no chair—no machine will ever bring back the shakes,

the feeling of steel edges carving out proof that the human body doesn't have nearly as many limits as most people think.

There is the muffled sound of a blade slipping the wrong way, and the dull thud of a body landing on the ice. One long line stretches from the door at the home bench to the Phoenix's right wingtip. Sitting at the end of it, looking up at me in the bleachers, is Elle. All 110 pounds of her, sprawled flat on the ice, having just joined the ranks of people who've gotten the pleasure of seeing the Baron's rafters from that angle. I worry briefly that she might've hit her head on the way down, but as she sits up her hands go directly to her tailbone. Yup, we're good.

I can see from up here she hasn't tied her skates right. She tries getting up by planting both feet beneath her and sort of reverse-squatting herself straight up. With her ankles bent the way they are, I'm not at all surprised she ends up right back where she started. She manages to spin herself around, though.

"Hey, don't just sit there!" she calls over her shoulder.

"But you're doing so well!"

"Har har. Come show me what I'm doing wrong."

Shaking my head, I push myself back from the section railing. The lower level has seats instead of aluminum bleachers, and the steps are cement, not scaffolding. I'd never imagined myself sitting up here—I'd actually never even *been* up here in my three years skating for Phoenix. Before that, I'd watch the games from my dad's box on the upper level. Now, as I tilt myself back on my rear wheels and hop down the steps, I think about what a crime it is to watch a hockey game from inside a windowed room. I catch a face-full of the smell of Zamboni wash from the ventilator directly above the steps, and when I finally make it ice-level my heart is pounding. It has nothing to do with being tired.

The door on the outside of the home bench is just big enough for my chair to fit through, but the space is too narrow for me to get in front of the bench itself. I consider getting myself up onto it for a second. Don't. It feels somehow sacrilegious. Four years ago, this was my bench. The Roost down the tunnel behind me was my dressing room. This ice was my ice. What is any of it to me now? I'm not prepared to feel as alienated as I do, stuck between the bench and the tunnel without a clue where I should be next.

“Hey.”

I look up. Elle's gotten herself back to the bench and she's leaning over the barrier, looking at me with that face. Eyebrows knotted together, pouting slightly. If it's possible to spear someone in the forehead with a look, she's found a way to do it. Between that and a puck... I feel the edge of the scar on my chin as I try to avoid her asking me what's wrong. Getting whaled in the face by a hard piece of rubber at triple digits is exactly as much fun as it sounds, but Elle is Elle. If I had to choose, still would rather take the puck.

I'm not fooling her. It's actually pretty hard to lie to Elle about anything. Call it a super power.

“Come here, you need to re-tie your skates.”

She lingers on the barrier for a second. I can feel her eyes on me, but right now I'm looking at the floor. There's a six-inch gash in the rubber right in front of the kick plate. Major scored a game-winner in the last second of our last game before the tourney, to break up a 1-1 split we'd been sitting on since the first period. I'd never seen a 2-buck Russian cover that much ice airborne in my life. Went right over the boards into Ringer, who weighed about fifteen pounds less, followed by every guy in a white sweater on and off the ice. We sailed into the

playoffs on a 23-game streak. I don't remember who scratched 23 into the kick plate, though. It was the best season of my career. That was also the only season in my career I didn't finish.

“Hey.”

Elle pokes me in the ribs. She's sitting on the bench next to my chair, looking at me as she re-ties her laces. Jesus Christ those are bunny knots. Not even the Baron's beat up, century-old rental skates deserve *that*. The corners of her mouth turn upwards slightly.

“All right, stop,” I beg her. “Just come here.”

She grins, all teeth, her feet wagging back and forth on the heels of her blades. Her front teeth are big for her mouth. She kind of looks like a mouse: tiny, round everything. A hyperactive, incredibly stubborn, too-good-for-this-world, crazy-ass mouse. Her blue-streaked, purple hair sticks out from under the helmet I made her wear because I know exactly what kind of 21-year-old she is. Helmet thing didn't go over too well, but she knows I can be stubborn too.

“What, are my toddler ways not satisfactory to Your Holiness?”

“No, they're not.” I hold out my hands and motion for her to come closer.

She pouts, but slides over on the bench. I put her left skate up on my knee and unlace it.

“It has to be tight,” I tell her. “Your foot shouldn't be moving inside the boot at all. Is this even the right size? It looks big.”

She tugs on her bangs and looks away.

“It's the smallest size they had.”

I glance up at her and she squirms.

“*Fine*, it's the smallest *adult* size they had.” She leans back on the bench, her shoulders bunched up, growling at nothing. Fuckin weirdo. I laugh.

“Jeez, you sure you wouldn’t like a nice pair of pink ones? They might even have light up soles.”

She kicks her foot out of my grip and lets her heel fall back down on my knee. I don’t feel it but I still get a jolt in the pit of my stomach. That really is bizarre, for the rest of your body to remember how to react even when parts of it can’t anymore.

“You shush,” Elle says. “That skate’s not gonna tie itself.”

“Don’t sass me woman.”

“I’ll sass whoever I *please*.”

She sticks her tongue out at me, and it isn’t half-assed either. She puts some effort into it, eyes screwed shut and everything. Consider me sassed.

“Whatever,” I reply, laughing again and shaking my head. I rap the ankle of her boot and she lifts her other leg up, but I push her foot away. “No, you try it now.”

“I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Old news, Spaz.” I deflect the second swipe of her foot with my hand. Beat up or not, these edges are neat, and let’s just say this pair hasn’t been toweled off as often as it should have been. Tying the first skate left a streak of rust on my pant leg. “Just tie it like a shoe,” I insist. “Make sure it’s tight at the ankle, and for God’s sake no bunny knots.”

Elle lifts her right foot up onto the bench and tugs the laces tighter. The skates are soft from use. They’re not perfect but they’ll work.

“Feel how your foot sits back in the heel?”

She nods.

“Good, that’s what you want.”

She succeeds in knotting the skate—properly—and stands up.

“Funny,” she says, bouncing back and forth on the blades. “I can jump off buildings, no sweat. Fly? Nahtta prahblem. But the idea of strapping knives to my feet and waltzing out onto a frictionless surface is, like, stupid scary.”

I lean back in my chair, crossing my arms. It’s getting cold. I’d never sat still for so long in here before.

“Well, you’re at least a few tries away from waltzing. I’ll give you hokey pokey, *if* you can make it to the other side and back without eating it.”

“Well aren’t you just the *comedian* today.”

Elle turns on her heel and stomps out of the box. Doesn’t make it too far, though. She grips the wall with both hands almost immediately. I can tell from the perplexed look on her face that her legs are shaking.

“Nate…” She lets out a nervous laugh. “Did you ever get scared? Or is it really just me?”

I smile at that, even as I sigh through my teeth.

“I got scared,” I assured her.

“Really?”

“Every damn time.”

Her eyes get big enough to pop out of her head. Please. She should know by now I’m not fucking *immune* to fear. Hockey’s scary. Our *lives* are scary, but that’s a whole different gongshow. This? This is simple. This is laps around the rink, one skate in front of the other, until the shakes go away, the puck drops, and it’s time to connect the dots.

I wedge my chair past the bench—scrape the shit out of my push rim but what the hell. I’ll fix it later—and stop right up against the barrier.

“Come out to here,” I tell her. “Hold onto the wall. You’re ok.”

She inches the three feet towards me and stops. She's got her head down, looking at her skates. Her face is pale. She chews on her lip.

"Turn and face the other side of the rink. And head up, ok?"

She hesitates. Her eyes turn slowly away from her feet.

"You mean, let go...?"

"Yeah. Trust me, half of this is in your head."

"You sure? My head is pretty screwed up."

"Did it hurt that much?"

She looks at me, confused.

"When you fell the first time. Did it hurt as much as it scared you?" I shrug, resting my elbows on the wall. "Besides. It's not like you can't *stop* yourself from falling. You can *fly*."

Elle turns herself around with a scoff.

"We're in *public*. If I wipe out, I wipe out like a regular old, *non*-super person."

"Point being: If the end of the world can't hurt you, neither can a few feet of ice."

No matter what happened to me, remember? I promised. It hurt me but it won't hurt you. I won't let it.

I nudge her arm, rigid like a two-by-four against the wall. Her hands are vices on the ledge.

"Loosen up," I say. "Bend your knees, and push off. You can do it."

Elle lets out a long breath and nods.

"Ok. Ok. Fuck."

That makes me want to laugh, but I figure it won't help. Hockey's a one-on-one battle first, no matter how many guys are on the ice. It's between you and the shakes.

Elle pushes off the wall. She wobbles, but brings her right foot under her—ankles straight this time—and recovers. The second stride is surer than the first. She gets out a few feet before her hands finally unclench and her body slides forward at the knees, and glides.

I don't know what I feel then. I mean, I never really understand the way I feel around Elle. She's a kind of "in between" I can't find my way out of. There's no point B. No predictions. No strategy. She's just whatever the hell it means to be the four-foot-ten stick of a person who took everything I ever believed was true and made it something else. To have to deal with "sort of" on a daily basis infuriates me more than I can explain. This person... She turns to make her second lap past the bench, beaming, her face flushed from the cold and, I'd like to think, from the same stupid logic that kept me on the ice for as long as I was. This person has me beat without even trying.

Elle gets adventurous, and takes a sharper turn towards center ice than she was probably going for. Her left foot goes way out, the right drags behind. She'll spin out and land hard. It's gonna hurt. I see her eyes get wide and the color drain from her face. I react before I can even register what I'm doing.

A cloud of peeled ice rises around her. Her jacket billows out like it's caught in a gust of wind, slow-motion. She spins, then floats, the momentum driving her upwards for a fraction of a second before I let up off the brakes. The sensation of it—the thing I can do—is like trying to lift a weight underwater. My hands clench on the armrests of my chair and it's as though I'm physically reaching across the thirty feet between us and catching her. My body exerts the force required. Elle stops falling, and I haven't left the box.

Next time I blink, It's over. My hands relax. She lands seated, blinking, her mouth hanging open. I don't know if she gets that she just barely scraped past a solid week of not being able to stand up straight. The whole thing lasts less than a second.

“Woah!” she cries, rolling onto her knees. Her jeans are covered in powder. “Did you see that? That was like, a thing of *majesty!*”

“Yeah, I saw it,” I reply. I lean on the wall, shaking my head for a different reason than what Elle probably had in mind.

Oh, I can feel it. I'm positive this person is gonna end up killing me somehow. Knowing her, probably in some kind of freak cooking related accident. She almost burned the house down the other day trying to toast a pop-tart. Or Saturday when she saw people playing corn hole outside a frat house, and now bean bags will continue to be the most hilarious thing in the world until she finds some other random thing absurdly entertaining.

And then there's hockey. Last week, I was watching the Falcs game in the living room and she comes out of the kitchen eating raw green beans out of a produce bag, sits down on the couch, and asks me to explain what's going on. And I get about as far as, “Well there's six guys on each side,” when the Falcons score—Mantha one-times it glove-side off a saucer from Larkin on the blue line. The goalie had tripped. It was a garbage goal. But it blew her mind. I miss the replay because I'm watching her face light up like she'd just witnessed the impossible.

The way she finds amazement in everything should make sense to me. She doesn't have any memories from before that day four years ago, when she woke up and this whole mess started. Everything is magic to her. But it doesn't make sense. I watch her laugh at Mantha pounding the glass on his way back to the bench, and my brain dings hard on the logic thing for once. I see Elle in a way I'd never seen her before and I'm not ready.

That's when she turns to me, drops her green beans on the carpet, and announces: "Nate I want you to show me how to do that."

And now I'm here. I don't care about the cold, or my jacked up push rim, or how I'm gonna get myself out of this box now. I'm wondering why the look on her face watching that goal made me feel the way I used to feel out on the ice, legs shaking. How there isn't a better reason to come back to the Baron than to sit here and watch Elle skid back and forth just a few feet away from where it all changed.

The last thing I remember from that night, I was staring up at the lights and I didn't feel anything. There was an ocean in my head. There were a lot of faces moving around. I remember my coach leaning over me. Asking me questions I didn't hear. I remember spitting out my mouth guard because it was suffocating me. And I remember Elle—it was the first time I'd seen her, standing up in the bleachers before I took that hit, looking at me like she had no idea what she was doing there but knowing exactly what was about to happen anyway. I remember seeing her face, and I remember fear, and I remember breathing. Does she know what being back here means? Does she understand? Would she have something to say if I ever asked her?

I glance up to catch Elle wobbling forward, her arms like windmills, before planting both palms flat on the ice in front of her skates. She looks like a damn saw-horse. Her head snaps up like I'd caught her doing something illegal. One of her arms has come out of its jacket sleeve—don't ask me how. Her face is the color of the dot on the ice between her feet. And then there's me, the guy in the wheelchair, teaching the most uncoordinated person who ever lived how to skate.

I can't hold it in this time. I pitch forward onto the wall and laugh until I can't breathe. At Elle. At myself. At the 23 carved into the kick plate. At the absurd idea that anything I ever did under this roof matters as much as this, right now, stuck "in between" and not giving a fuck.

| *Keon.*

This isn't the first time I've woken up on somebody's couch. I've still got my clothes on. There's that. And I remember everything that happened to me the night before, which wasn't much. No hangover. I'm pretty sure I didn't burn anything down this time. Nobody's lying on top of me, or under me, also undressed. For all you kids out there, that means I didn't get fucked or fucked anybody I didn't originally intend to. Whoop-de-fucking-hoo-ray. For once I'm not the bottom line on a list of bull shit parents tell their teenagers not to do. But somehow this feels so much worse than all those times before, because of whose couch this is. Because of whose ceiling I'm looking at. Because, despite everything I'd done, he didn't cave my skull in like I was kind of hoping he would. Instead, he threw a duffel and a granola bar at me and a stick clatters onto the floor.

Nate fucking Kyle. Woke me up at 5 in the fucking morning. To go fucking skate.

I roll painfully over. I'd probably slept four hours. Maybe less. I'd just worked a late double at the diner and I still smelled like breakfast I obviously wasn't getting. Blinking felt like scrubbing my eyeballs with sandpaper.

"I've only got the ice for an hour," he said. He's already wheeling back into the kitchen.

"Get up."

Only.

I sit up, every muscle in my body protesting. I'd been here for three weeks and the area around the living room couch had kind of developed into my own personal ring of crap. School crap. Work crap. Life crap. My computer and a stack of books and a half-written paper on Defoe sit on the coffee table. Everything I own spills out of my beat up old E-Lan bag that hasn't had anything remotely to do with hockey in it in four years. Right now, Pixie's cat is sleeping in it, curled up on a pile of my clothes like a furry calico bowling ball. Good to know the damn thing's still good for something.

I sit up against the arm of the couch and open the new duffel bag. It still has the tags on it. The skates inside are still unlaced. The gloves still wrapped in plastic. I pull out one of the skates and wince at the estimated amount of money I now owe the person I'd spent my entire life hating, not to mention the three weeks of unpaid rent.

"Kyle, what the hell." I put the skate down and pick the stick up off the floor. It's a righty but...Jesus Christ. 130 flex? It's a fucking I-beam. Was he expecting me to play hockey or murder somebody?

Kyle comes back from the kitchen, setting a hockey bag down on the floor next to his chair. He's got a mug with a tea bag sitting in it.

"Just a hunch," he said, "but I'm thinking you don't shoot like a wet sheet of paper anymore. And I'd rather not have to buy a new stick every week."

Every week? As in, this is going to be a regular thing?

I pull on the nearest pair of shoes, not looking up. Wet sheet of paper. Piece of shit. But things *are* different, since... Well. Since four years ago. I-beam or not, I could probably snap this stick with my bare hands. The thought shakes me more than expected.

"What exactly are you playing at?"

“Like I said,” Kyle replies, picking up his bag again. “Going on a hunch. I’ll be waiting in the car. You’ve got ten minutes.”

He leaves. A draft enters the living room when he opens the front door. I can tell the difference in temperature, but I don’t feel cold. I haven’t felt cold in four years, and never in a million did I think that’s something I would miss. The door shuts, the blade-end of the stick slides off the couch and hits the floor, and the noise scares the cat out of my luggage.

So I guess that’s how I ended up shooting at an open net from the blue line at the Baron, wearing a Phoenix sweater of all fucking things, as Nate Kyle of all fucking people fed me pucks one-handed with his wheelchair parked inside the right face-off circle.

I miss half of the shots. My hands are fucking *rough*. I hadn’t picked up a stick since dropping out, and it doesn’t help that he’s watching me like a fucking experiment the entire time, snapping pucks from the upturned bucket next to his wheel without looking down once. He doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t break his rhythm. He just watches, the pucks clanging off the posts, the cross-bar, banging against the rear boards, and when the universe fucking feels like it, maybe a couple actually hit the net, and don’t make much of a sound at all. It’s maddening. Pucks off the post ring high and sharp. Off the kick plate, an explosion like a gunshot. No wonder they have a god-damn buzzer. Compared to the stupid amount of noise you make when you fucking miss, the actual point of the game—scoring? Silence. Things burn silently too. I remember.

But I’m on the ice now, not inside a burning house. Sometimes it’s difficult to separate where I am from where I was that night. I can feel my temples pounding. I grind my teeth. The I-beam bends just a few degrees more with each shot. My chest gets tight and hot and if I don’t calm down I know I’m gonna just... With three or four pucks left in the bucket, Kyle looks up at

me suddenly and his expression shifts just a little. Just enough. The way people do when they realize that yes, my eyes are actually red, and they're red because four years ago the same thing that took Pixie's memories and Kyle's legs plastered the word "murderer" on my face like a fucking headline. And I will never know whether or not my sister was afraid when the ceiling came down on top of us.

Kyle stops passing me pucks. I toss my stick away and step off the line. It spins away. I'm already at center ice when it hits the post and glances off. Doesn't break. *Damn it.*

I sink down on my skates and my last stride takes me just a few more feet before my knees touch the ice. The next time I open my eyes I'm looking up at the black hole of the ceiling and the lights floating in it. My body heat is climbing. I'm so fucking *angry* I'm afraid if I move I'll just...

A puck hits my left foot and I lift my head. Kyle is glaring at me. He hasn't moved.

"If you don't cool it they'll have to re-ice the entire rink," he calls. "Quit flailing and finish the bucket."

I get up. My back is wet. There's a me-shaped indentation in the ice a fraction of an inch deep. Re-ice the rink my ass. If I wanted to I could burn this building to the ground. What the hell kind of right do I have to exist in a place like this, accepting kindness from someone I hate because he makes me hate myself so much more?

"What do you want from me?" I snap, coming at him. "What, did you expect some breakthrough in dragging me out here? Did you expect me to just start over, become some sort of fucking *superhero* and join your fucked up little club and make the world a better place? I don't *fix* shit, Kyle, I screw it up. What. Do you fucking. *Expect.*"

I stop hard, just a few feet from the chair. He gets a face full of peeled ice. Or he would have, if it wasn't floating in front of him like he's surrounded by some kind of force field. That's just it, isn't it. He protects, like he always has, and I'm what he's got to protect against. I'd played pest against Kyle in every checking league from Bantam to the NCAA and I'd never been able to finish a hit on anyone on his line while he was on the ice. Ever. He was A-Gram's main strategy, contingency plan, and backup. He'd grind triple shifts and find the gas to bury a greasy one from south of who the fuck knew where. Never mattered how. He just did it. He was the guy guys like me couldn't touch.

"I expect you to finish this bucket," he says.

The ice settles in a little wall on the border of the face-off circle. There are three pucks left. I look at them, and then back up at him, and sigh. I'm tired. I'm pissed. I haven't slept through a single night in years. I keep seeing faces turning to ashes in the flames. I go pick my stick up out of the net. It's been four years. Kyle has it together. I should at least... You know what, what the hell. What the actual hell.

"And then what?" I ask him.

Kyle laughs at that. It throws me off. He pulls one of the pucks out away from his chair and edges it forehand to backhand as he looks into the stands like he can see something out there I can't and it's the funniest shit in the world.

I try to poke it away from him, but he heels it up and over my blade, tossing his hand back on the shaft of his stick to pull the puck back towards him. Stops it next to his wheel, and snaps it, clean, top left. I watch it run down the back of the net and spin on its edge until it falls flat on the ice. I guess that's one way to make a point. Son of a bitch.

“Look,” Kyle says. “I don’t know what you’re gonna do later. I can’t tell you. But right now you’re making something very simple a lot harder than it needs to be.” He pulls the second-to-last puck from the pile and passes it to me. “And you’re pulling your shots. Follow through.”

Nate Kyle was Anagram’s number one draft pick at 17 and the only reason he didn’t sign right out of Juniors was because he wanted to go to college. These last four years he should have been playing his 82 games a season. But he isn’t.

“Why are you doing this?”

Kyle shrugs, letting out another laugh.

“Why’d you enroll at A-Gram?” he asks. “Why’d you get a job? Why’d you stick around?”

Because I’m tired of being a fuck-up. Because I can’t owe you anything. Because I’m afraid of being left alone with myself.

But then again. You already knew all of that, didn’t you. You fuck.

Kyle takes off his left glove to check his watch.

“We’ve got five minutes left before they kick us out,” he says. “You still got that backhand or what?”

I swipe the puck and carry it down to center ice before wheeling around again. I don’t feel like an experiment anymore. I’m gonna whale the shit out of this puck, I can tell you that much. I charge up the slot with it on the back of my blade and even before I wind up I get the feeling this will be the only shot I ever take that really means anything. I’m sure I’ll break the fucking stick. I don’t. But Jesus Christ it feels good as hell to go in on something and come out with everything still in one piece.

| *Elle.*

I spend a lot of time hanging out outside the Baron. There's a stone bench under an oak tree across the street from the student entrance. A gift from the class of 1962. It's a weird bench. It has a really narrow seat and a really high back, the concrete rubbed smooth from contact. A layer of green moss covers the wing-shaped arm rests that curve forward. I sit there after class on most days and kind of just look up at the Baron rising up over the trees on the Cross, tracing the weathered edges of the feathers carved into the arms of the bench, and try to remember something before the first time I ever saw that building. I can never do it. Four years ago, my life began when I woke up lying in the grass on Central Cross, just a few hundred feet from this bench, and from the Baron.

I have mixed feelings about this place.

The Baron is a big, red, ellipse-shaped building on North Cross. Nate told me it was built more than a century ago, but they'd come and given it a new face every couple of decades. Now, it has a big domed roof, impossibly black, and its red brick walls are broken up by cement and glass panels divided with wavy lines. It looks so modern. Only the enormous segmented windows at its east and west ends give any clue to how old the building actually is. The way Nate talks about it, you'd think the place was sacred. Having no memory of it other than the accident that took Nate's legs, I can't share that opinion. But I'm trying to.

For now, I sit on the 1962 bench, chewing on the end of the lace on my sweatshirt, and trying desperately to remember.

“Hey.”

I look up as Keon blurs past me, makes a hard turn, and skates back towards the bench. He has his bag with him, probably having just gotten out of class himself. He takes a seat next to me, sticking his long legs out in front of him. He always seems to have his hands in his pockets. He’s wearing dark jeans today—I think they’re purple but they’re almost black. He wears a lot of black. It’s become familiar, though. I’d be weirded out if he wore like, yellow or something. The second wheel from the front on each of his skates is bright green instead of clear. He has a green army jacket on. I don’t recognize this one. It must be new. It makes me slightly uncomfortable. But his beanie isn’t new. It’s the same black one he always wears and I focus on that instead of the new jacket. He sits and looks straight ahead, and he has one earbud in while the other one bounces off his chest as he moves. He snaps the gum in his mouth and waits for me to say something, as usual. Nicotine gum. Nate said if he wants to stay at the house he’d have to quit, and he’s been sticking to it.

I pull my feet up onto the bench and hug my knees against my chest.

“I’ve never seen you come this way before,” I say.

He shrugs. He’s shaped like a triangle. Nate’s a rectangle. It’s gonna take me a little bit to get used to the missing corner.

“My last class was cancelled. No power in the Hall... Can you believe that? As much as this school flipping costs.”

“Huh.”

“Is everything ok?”

“What’s it like, playing in there?” I ask him suddenly. “I mean like. Against Phoenix.”

It takes him a second to suss out that I’m talking about the Baron.

“Oh. Oh, it’s pretty intense. I mean, it’s the Baron. Like.” He trails off, thinking. “...Like, if you’re really good at this one thing—I mean, you think you’re really good. And then you go and try to do it in the place where that thing was invented, and try to do it better than the people who invented it. I mean, hockey wasn’t invented here, but you get what I mean.”

“I get what you mean.”

“Why?”

I shrug this time, looking down at my phone. Nate’s in class for another two hours and won’t see the meme I sent him until then. It’s about superheroes. It’ll make him laugh. I don’t know how to answer Keon’s question, so I just look at the “delivered” written under the blue bubble sent at 1:21pm.

I can feel Keon’s eyes on me though. He has a way of watching things that isn’t the same as the way Nate watches things. They’re so different and so much alike at the same time, but I haven’t figured out exactly how yet. It’s probably not the eyes. Nate’s eyes are light and he watches unobtrusively.

When Keon looks at you and you look back, it’s kind of like looking at a bright flame. You know? When you look at it, and then you look away, and there’s that purplish shape that floats there like a ghost, even if you close your eyes. I don’t think he means to do that, but he knows he does it. And I think it bothers him.

I squirm a bit in my seat and shove my phone back into the front pocket of the hoodie I stole from Nate. It’s really big. And warm. My hands fit inside the sleeves. He doesn’t know I took it yet. He won’t care.

“Pixie?”

Keon calls me that. I think it’s funny.

“Hey Pix.” His hand hovers over my shoulder. “*Hey.*”

I lift my head.

“Oh. Sorry. I spaced out.”

He laughs and puts his hands back in his pockets—three nervous chuckles. Takes a long breath. He’s looking at me sideways. I know he doesn’t really understand me, but the weird thing is he’s trying to. Like it’s something he feels he has to do. I don’t know what he’s trying to prove, or who he’s trying to prove it to. But he’s trying.

“Are you sure you’re good?” he asks me.

“I don’t know,” I reply, turning my phone over and over inside my pocket. “I’m just. I want a different memory of this place.”

Keon processes for a second. I can see the wheel spinning. He sinks a little against the bench and looks at the Baron, his mouth open a little like he’s about to say something but it got stuck.

“Me too,” he says finally. Honestly.

“Keon, do you hate him?”

He shakes his head.

“No.”

“He doesn’t hate you.”

“I know.”

“Why do you always act like you hate each other then?”

Keon laughs at that, but it’s a tired laugh. He snaps his gum and looks at the Baron.

“Habit, I guess,” he replies. “In hockey, there’s more than just the game on the ice going on. It’s...there’s a code. He was the captain. His job was to keep his shit together and look out for his guys. I was the pest. My job was to make his difficult. We were always kind of meant to hate each other.”

I pull the collar of my hoodie up over my mouth and scowl.

“You were a dirty player.”

“It’s just the game,” he says. “I did what my team needed me to do. It’s not like I went around clubbing guys over the head. I said there’s a code.”

“So what did you do?”

He grins.

“I was annoying. Tried to pick fights so the other guy would take a penalty for dropping first. Talked a lot of shit. Trapped the game at the blue line. Excessive body checking, like to the point where it’s weird.” He lets out a harsh laugh. “Hockey’s the straightest sport known to man. You’ll never see a guy lose his shit the way this one kid—what the hell’s his name... Cherry picking mother—”

I glare at him and he trails off with a laugh.

“Well. Long story short, there’s a thing you do to trip a guy in front of the crease where you push down on the back of his pants with your stick like this.” He holds his fists out about two feet apart, pantomiming holding an invisible bar horizontally in front of him. “Well I just shoved it in there shaft first. I lost my stick and got punched in the face right here.” He points to his chin. “But it was worth it. He played sloppy three shifts in a row before his coach finally benched him.”

I watch him tell the story, sinking further and further into my hoodie. He seems thoroughly pleased with himself; at his job; at Keon Tarik, the pest. I can't say I understand completely what he's telling me, but what I do understand sours the bitter taste in my mouth. I hug my knees tighter. He notices me looking at him and the last laugh escapes him. His head tilts back against the back of the bench. His eyes are the same fiery red as the leaves of the oak tree reaching over us.

"Of course," he admits, "playing off what half the league already thought about me was the easiest thing to do. Like I said. Hockey's the straightest sport known to man. If I can't change that, might as well use it to throw some homophobic fuckhead off his game. Worked like a charm."

He looks down and smiles sadly at his feet. A leaf gets caught in his jacket. He plucks it and holds it in both hands, running his thumbs over its edges. He lets out a long sigh that ends in a groan of exasperation.

"I don't want you to think I'm an ass," he says. "I don't know why. I mean I never cared before. But, I just. I don't do that stuff anymore. I never wanted to *hurt* Kyle, or anyone else."

I lift my chin out of my hoodie. I believe what he's saying. I do.

"I don't think you're an ass," I say. "You can *be* one, but I don't think you *are* one. Fundamentally."

He tosses the leaf away and shoves his hands back in his pockets again, switching his feet so his left rests on top of his right.

"Hah. Ok. So what am I, then? Fundamentally."

"I haven't figured that out yet," I tell him, swinging my legs down and getting up. "I'll let you know when I do."

“Fair enough,” Keon shrugs. “Where you headed now?”

I look down at my phone, my stomach doing a flip just like it does every time I see Nate’s name come up in my notifications.

Haha, nice, his text says, in reference to the meme.

And then: *My discussion was cancelled. No power in the Hall. Want lunch?*

“Nate got out of class early too,” I tell Keon. “He wants to get food. Wanna come?”

Keon tilts his head up at me, his grin crooked like he’s about to say something Keon-ish, but he doesn’t. I’m glad he doesn’t. It doesn’t happen very often, but once in a while I spot the real Keon hiding under the pest. I don’t know who that Keon is, yet, but I get the feeling it’ll be worth the wait when I do. For now, he shrugs. That means “sure,” I think. He gets up.

“Keon?”

“Yeah, Pix.”

I look at my phone. At the Baron looming above the trees. I put my phone in my pocket and turn my back to the arena.

“You’re not...*glad*, he...”

Keon stiffens and sobers instantly. He leans down to look at me, placing a hand on my shoulder. I’m staring directly into the candle flame and my eyes bloom with ghostly purple shapes.

“Pixie, of *course* not. Nate Kyle deserved what he had more than anyone I ever met,” he says to me, slowly, taking his time with each syllable as though to hammer their truth in place. “There was nobody better. I knew it, and so did every guy he ever played with or against. And another thing I know?” He points to the bench, and then behind me, to the Baron. “I know he wouldn’t want you to sit out here every day wishing there was something you could have done to

change what happened in there. You want a different memory of that place? Make new ones. Get off that bench and..." He takes a step back like he'd realized something in what he'd just said.

"...And follow through."

I clutch fistfuls of my hoodie, looking up at Keon as he looks down at me. I think of three days ago, being on the ice in that enormous place. Looking up and seeing Nate sitting in the stands, his eyes closed, his head tilted back slightly, breathing. He was in a place then I have never been. I watched him remember a version of himself I've never met.

I'd seen Nate grieve for what he'd lost. Two years of hospital stays and physical therapy, two more of readjustments, learning how to function again. How to get through doors. How to get dressed in the morning. How to use the bathroom. And Nate, hard-headed and unshakable as ever, relentlessly throwing himself at every obstacle until he'd utterly defeated it. I know what it means for him to grieve, and that is not what he was doing in the stands three days ago. Who in the world am I to sit here doing it for him?

"You know," I say, sighing. "You kind of sound like him right now."

Keon straightens with a laugh.

"Ugh, jeez. Just what I need, eh? To have him rubbing off on me."

"Maybe you do," I reply, laughing too.

He gives me a look, but he doesn't disagree.

I walk North Cross back towards Central. Keon takes long, slow strides to keep pace with me.

I was never as aware of my own body as I am now that half of it doesn't work anymore. I was six even, 195 at my heaviest playing weight. By hockey standards, I wasn't big at all. But after 19 surgeries, all to pull out all the broken pieces of my spine and bolt the two halves of me back together again, the eight titanium brackets and actually added two inches to my height. That's the part I've always found ridiculous.

I was supposed to break 200 pounds by the end of pre-season before I'd even get to entertain the thought of putting my ass on an NHL bench. You know what my GM would've done to add two inches to my game? Everything I'd done up until that point was pre-requisite. I got drafted at 17, on a hunch that by the time I was 22 I'd be groomed into something worth the time and cap space. The Falcs lost out on that move, but hey. It's the business. The management dealt with it with flare: had Henrik Zetterberg and half the lineup hand-deliver a gift basket full of get-well cards to the hospital, put my picture up on the scoreboard before the game that weekend against Chicago, and donated the proceeds from my jersey sales to pay for my medical bills.

To be honest, it left me whiplashed. I never imagined my life could fall apart as neatly as it did, topped with a big red bow. They still talk about it on ESPN sometimes, and I've gotten to the point where I don't have to turn the TV off when they do. I've seen the YouTube videos of the hit. I just don't recognize myself in them. It's like seeing your reflection distorted in a fun-house mirror, or at the bottom of a murky puddle. Doesn't feel totally unreal, but doesn't quite belong to you either. But I'm taller.

| *Nate.*

My father's name is Dr. Aldrich Kyle. I don't relate to him much, except in the last name, and the fact that we look nearly identical. My dad's always intimidated the shit out of me—haven't been able to look in a mirror without having a mild heart attack since high school. Plus, every time I walk—wheel—into this damn building, everybody automatically thinks I'm an asshole.

Kyle Technologies. This sixty-story glass and stainless steel obelisk is the “legacy” I've been trying to outrun my entire life.

I'm here a lot, unfortunately for my sanity, but it works out great for my bills. As soon as I told my dad I was ready to finish my last year and a half of college, he's been at this whole father-son thing like I'd triggered a pre-programmed response. He even came to see my u-grad research sponsor. I'd been in the lab for fifteen seconds; hadn't even gotten the chance to find out what Allen, my grad student mentor, was dropping Excessive Colorful Language about in the red light room. We were building a car that runs on algae. Al finds a way to blanket half the lab in green puree. But that's a different headache. Professor comes out of his office, takes one look at the pond of algae guts, and tells me I've been reassigned to a project the biomed department's spearheading in partnership with—you got it—KT. It's funny if you think about it. I spend eighteen years playing hockey in an attempt to do something my dad couldn't have conceived, break my back, and end up working in his spinal division designing prostheses for paraplegics.

But I'm not here to work now. It's sad, but you can pretty much nail down the man responsible for my existence with a single absurd phrase: I'm here because my dad wrote me an email asking me to come to his office today, November 13th, at 10:15 am.

I wheel through the door at 10:01 and change.

You could fit my entire house in the atrium between the entrance and the elevators. If you look up through the glass ceiling, you can count the windows up the side of the tower all the way to the thirty-second floor where my dad's office is. The size of this place and the misleading openness of it. It has to be intentional. I'd have trouble believing somebody could walk in here, see all this, and still have the same opinion of themselves. I mean come on. What good could it have possibly done for me to want to *be* this? I don't feel any bigger now than I did at six years old, dragging my duffel across the marble floor, and being so terrifyingly convinced that nothing I'd manage to do in my life would ever be enough. I always ordered jerseys a size bigger than I needed because of that—from the very beginning, right through my three years skating for Phoenix. I wonder if Dad ever noticed.

I have the sudden urge to put my suit jacket back on. Instead, I wheel towards the elevator. Sit there fidgeting as ten other people file in after me and, one by one, the buttons on the panel light up. I'm gonna be stuck in here for a while I check my watch. 10:07. I look up and smile awkwardly at one of the researchers from my lab's floor I've probably spoken to twice in the month I've been working here. He looks down at his phone and sticks his other hand in his coat pocket, shifting an inch further away from my chair as though he thinks it'll somehow help. God I hate elevators. Reminds me of standing in the tunnel before a game and the bleachers rumbling above my head and on either side of me, pitch dark except for that gap of light in front of me broken up by the collective shape of the rest of the team. A mass of heads and shoulders,

pushing, laughing, moving. Captain takes the ice last. To be honest, I think I was the only one who didn't move during those moments. Never made a sound. All I could focus on was my legs shaking, how slow everything seemed to be, and how in just a few minutes it'd all speed up.

I make the decision to put my jacket back on as soon as enough people get off the elevator for me to move. Didn't really matter that I'd just overridden my initial stand on the issue, but at least I'm *making* decisions. Feels like I've moved forward in a small way. By the time I finally make it to my dad's floor, it's 10:14. I roll out of the elevator and book it down the hall just in time to see the outside door of the office open, a line of lab-coated people file out like they'd just attended a funeral, and my father. Standing there with his hand resting on the door handle, no quite frowning, but close.

My dad and I are—were the same height. Same dark brown hair, same set of the jaw, same straight, pointed nose. It's terrifying, too, to consider he's only 41, and doesn't look even that. We have similar opinions on most things except the things that matter to both of us, like what should've happened when he and my mom got divorced, and the amount of involvement I should have with the company. Almost every second we spend in the same room is usually an argument. We still haven't figured out who's more stubborn. He's got the experience, I've got logic, and we've both got a need to be right.

On the other hand, our differences are very specific. He's got brown eyes and mine are green, like my mom's. I don't want to be a doctor. I lost my accent when we moved from London to Anagram—I was barely three at the time. And he made me swear on my life I wouldn't have a kid anywhere near sixteen like he did.

“Nathanael,” he says, instead of hello.

“Hi Dad,” I reply.

He checks his watch. Looks up at me again.

“Come in,” he says, “I’ve just finished with my last meeting.”

He steps into the office and holds the door open for me. I wheel forward, looking up at the name etched into the glass, and the lines of titles beneath it:

*Dr. Aldrich Kyle, MD. PhD.
Chief Executive Officer
President of the Board
Director of Research*

They’re heavy, difficult to look at, and have so little to do with me it’s depressing.

My dad’s office is a bright, cavernous space with not much in it. There’s a glass desk facing the door, and a wall of windows behind him overlooking the Anagram Riverfront less than a block from the building. You can see the Falcons’ barn from here if you look East down the river, with its black dome and gray trusses making a branch pattern on its round outside face. Not hard to figure out why they call it the Nest. I remember sitting in here as a kid watching the huge cranes moving over the arena while it was still being built. Dreamed of skating under that roof while my dad sat in his office chair trying to convince me to look in the other direction.

“How’s the chair?” my dad asks me, startling me out of my thoughts.

“Oh. No, it’s great. I like the push back on this one a lot better.”

He kneels down to check my left wheel.

“You reduced the camber?”

“I left it at almost zero. It’s easier to get over curbs that way since taking the front wheels off.”

I turn the chair around and push forward, but hold onto the rim to stop. The momentum sets the free-spinning disk inside each wheel going. They’re hidden, but you can just barely hear them turning on their bearings.

“And that charges the battery for the balance mechanism,” my dad says, standing up. He lets out a short laugh. “Funding well-spent, I’d say.”

I look down at my push rim.

“Glad you think so,” I say. “Is that what you wanted to see me about?”

“No, no,” he says, leaning against his desk. He adjusts the sleeve of his navy jacket and crosses his arms. I don’t think I’ve ever seen my father wear anything other than business suits and lab coats.

“It’s been a while since we’ve spoken. Had a time of it finding a bloody stall in the nonsense walking through here daily.”

He trails off in a way that makes me feel like he’s got more to say, so I wait. But he just looks at me, at my chair, then through the window, eastward up the river. He looks tired, and that’s not a word I ever thought I’d be using to describe my father.

“I wanted to know how you were doing, Nathanael,” he says finally. “It’s been a few months now since you’ve gone back to university. I wanted to make sure you were set. House, money, taking care of yourself.”

“I’m fine, Dad,” I tell him, getting a little worried. “Are you?”

“Of course I am, what made you think otherwise?”

There it is. The short, straightforward way he makes people feel ridiculous for spending time feeling things. My father isn’t a cold person. He just doesn’t waste time, or words, or anything else. He says what he means to say and nothing more than that. And it’s familiar to me—more familiar than the weird, tired version of him I’d just seen looking out a window, thinking. But I have one distinct memory of him and my mom, and he doesn’t know this.

This was before my dad moved us into an apartment in the city, so I couldn't have been older than ten. I'd just gotten home from school on the day before Christmas break and my parents weren't in the house. There was a pond in the back yard of that house that froze over in the winter and I'd literally spend every second I wasn't at school or asleep out there. I hadn't even known my parents could skate. I got home that day, the house was dark, and when I went to the back yard, I found them there. My dad with his arms around my mom, skating in wide circles so close together that if I hadn't known there'd been ice out there I'd have sworn they were dancing. My mom moved out only four years after that. It really wasn't until very recently that I realized how much could change in that amount of time. Change, sure. But I think there's always something of the way things used to be that gets left over.

It's not very often, but my dad will still get the way he is now sometimes, when he looks at me, and I can see he misses my mom. She wanted me to move to New York with her. I couldn't. Despite everything, the expectations, the fears, how crushing this building is, and how hard I tried to get out from under it, I want to be my father's son. I couldn't be the second person to abandon him.

"Can you leave the nonsense to fend for themselves for an hour?" I ask him.

He looks up at me with a twinge of a smile on his face.

"Building might not be here when I get back, but in theory I suppose I could."

"Good enough," I say, wheeling back towards the door. "Come on. I'll buy you lunch, catch you up on what's good at school. It's nothing too exciting, though, just warning you now."

He searches my face for a good while before nodding his head slowly, sighing.

"I'd like that," he says.

He takes his overcoat off the back of his desk chair. People are glare at us as we get off the elevator, a mix of fear and wonder on their faces. When my dad smiles and thanks the security guard for holding open the front door, I think the poor woman might've started melting into her shoes. He walks next to my chair on the sidewalk, his hands in his coat pockets, looking as much like a giant as he always has, and it's like KT and every other building in the city bows a way. Not even when I could still walk do I remember a time when I felt like an equal standing next to my father. But as we stop at an intersection and wait for the crosswalk to open, he squeezes my shoulder and laughs:

“You're right,” he says. “Tighter camber looks a lot better on the street.”

I wonder if he knows I'd been waiting twenty-five years to hear him say that.

| ***Keon.***

Twigs Diner sits on the corner of Main and University, right in the middle of Old Town. It used to be a trolley station, just to give you an idea how old this damn building is. The tracks are still there, sticking out of the cobblestone street just far enough to where I can usually count on witnessing at least a few near wipeouts a day, and if I'm lucky, one good sprawler right on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant. I know I'm a sunuva bitch—never denied anything. But when you spend four nights and two morning shifts a week bussing tables and running plates in an eighty-year-old sports diner, you're not picky when it comes to free entertainment.

Apparently, Twigs has been a tradition in Anagram since hockey landed in the states, and the Falcons moved here from Victoria. I mean, this is Hockey Town, USA. Phoenix hockey's bred more top NHL prospects than Grand Rapids. It's not hard to understand why Twigs is stuffed with eight decades of ice warrior regalia when you're standing there looking up at a ten-foot American flag assembled from spray-painted pucks. Or the jersey wall of Phoenix greats reaching all the way back to a guy named Buckner in 1954. Kyle's 33's on that wall too—middle row, fourth from the right. Once in a while somebody will come by and take a picture with it.

I'm up to my elbows in dishwater when Dinger backs into the kitchen with another bin of dirty glasses. Our washing machine's busted—again. Don't know why Johnny, the owner, won't put in for a new one, but I learned my first week this battle has bested six years' worth of the trolley station's finest employees. I swear the damn machine's been here since before I was born.

Johnny's the kind of old man whose sole avenue in life is and has always been to own a diner. That, or a workshop at the North Pole. I mean he's been here for like fifty years, calls everybody "Kiddo," drops wicked fatherly advice you didn't even know you needed, accuses you of brown-nosing if your fifteen-minute breaks are even a second shorter than 20. He's got holiday-themed sweater vests, ok. I haven't seen any of them yet, but I've heard the stories. Johnny's a legend.

"Kid at table four's been throwing partially-digested french fries at the ceiling for twenty-six minutes and counting," Ding says as he puts the bin down on the counter. "Want in on the pot? I've got my tips for the day on the mom bursting into tears."

I look up at him and shake my head. I'm currently bent over the sink struggling to figure out what the hell's stuck in the garbage disposal.

"Hard pass," I tell him. "If I don't scrape together another two hundred this month I won't be able to show my face at the house."

"Ah, rent. My old enemy."

"Actually I've gotta pay my roommate back for new skates."

I pull a handful of orange rinds out of the drain. Figures. We can talk Johnny into a composter we don't *use* but not a washer.

"Nice roommate," Dinger says, raising his eyebrows and grinning.

"Not *that* kind of roommate you fuckwad."

"Yeah yeah, just joshing," he says. "You talking about Kyle?"

"Yeah."

I flick on the disposal and get a horrendous mixture of buzzsaw-eating-chainlink and the sound marbles make if you try to flush them down the toilet. I was an adventurous child. I flip the switch off and go back in.

“Man,” Dinger says, leaning backwards against the counter and crossing his arms. “You live with Nate Kyle. That still blows my mind.”

“It’s kind of exactly what you’d expect,” I tell him. “Wakes you up at ass o’clock to go skate. Judges you for how long you leave a bagel in the toaster. Fucking wakes you up at ass o’clock to go skate.”

“What’s that like?”

“Sleep and slightly burnt toast? Wouldn’t know.”

He frowns at me.

“Jesus, Dinger,” I scoff, “your fanboy is showing. He’s a guy, not a circus animal.”

“I know, just. I was nine when he went first in the draft. He’s why I wanted to come to A-Gram all the way from Seattle. You know?”

“Great, now I feel old.”

“You think you could introduce me sometime?”

I can feel something with a sharp edge in the drain. A broken glass, maybe, but I can’t quite get a grip on it. I’m only half listening to Dinger at this point, meaning I’m only getting half irritated.

“You literally served him breakfast two days ago. Maybe you could try doing the human thing where you say *hello* instead of gawking from the back like a d—Ow.” I yank my hand out of the sink, bristling with panic. “Flying fff—”

I snatch the towel Dinger takes off the rack by the door. It dawns on me that a scrape on my palm is peanuts. Doesn't matter how small it is. I get hurt, and my body heat flares up like a reflex, suddenly enough to make me dizzy. I hope Dinger didn't notice the steam coming out of the cut. I don't think so.

"Hey, Johnny, we've got a 2319!" Ding yells towards the back office.

Two guys in the kitchen laugh. Johnny pokes his head out of the office.

"What?"

Dinger kind of flops around when people don't get his references. That's usually funnier than the references. He also turns red. Yup, there it goes. I try to laugh. Try to calm down.

"It's a 23—never mind," he mutters, throwing another towel at me. "Keon cut his hand. We need to sanitize the sink."

"Oh." Johnny disappears back into the office for a second, then comes back out with a first aid kit, gloves and a bottle of cleaner. He nods at my hand. "Lemme see that, Kiddo."

I back away from him almost instantly. He and Dinger give me a weird look.

"Uh, no no," I stammer. "It's fine. I'm fine."

"I'm a trained combat medic, you know," Johnny tells me, winking through his quarter-inch-thick glasses. "Korea *and* Vietnam. Betcha can't spook me with a little nick like that."

My heart is pounding in my throat. The whole kitchen is quiet. Dinger's looking at me like I've lost my mind. I wonder what any of them would think if they knew I can't let Johnny see my hand because my blood is hotter than boiling water. And that's when I'm calm. I am not calm.

"Listen, I just...I have this thing with blood, ok?" I say, trying desperately to keep my breathing even. "I'll take care of it."

Johnny's leveling me out, I can feel it. He doesn't take his eyes off my face. I just can't look up at him.

"Alright, Kiddo," he says. "Why don'tcha go take your fifteen? I'll help Dinger clean this up. Ask Sharla for something out of the bakery when you go."

The thought of baked goods right now just makes me want to get sick. My body temperature's climbing faster than usual. Worse than at the rink. I just need to go before I can't hide it anymore. Forget what would happen if anyone touched me. At a certain point, everyone will be able to see.

"Dude, you're really pale," Dinger says. "Are you sure you're—"

"Yeah, fine, just me and my white ass. 'Scuse me."

I sidestep Dinger, swiping the first aid kit off the counter before he or Johnny can ask any more questions, dodge one of the runners with a tray full of food on my way out to the back hallway, and make a bee-line for the freezer.

My first thought is to call Pixie. I think she's at work, though. Damn it. God fucking damn it all to hell. I'm fucking hiding in a walk-in freezer behind a crate of frozen meat trying not to blow up the damn diner.

It's getting difficult to breathe. I'm holding my toweled hand against my chest, the first aid kit still wedged between my arm and my side and the corner of the metal box is digging into my ribs. But I feel like if I focus on anything at all except air going in and out I'll just melt down right here and take the whole building with me. The absurd hockey puck flag, the jersey wall, Johnny, fucking Dinger. This place stuffed with of 80 years' worth of crap from a fucking game that means a comical amount of *nothing* and all these people outside, the mom and her little cretin of a french fry-hating kid have shit to do and families and jobs and lives and I could just.

Can I get my phone out? Can I just do that? I can feel it in my shirt pocket stuck between the first aid kit and my pounding chest.

My hands are shaking so bad I can barely figure out the shit I've gotta tap on the screen to get to Pixie's number. I put the first aid kit down on the floor and lift the phone to my ear as it starts ringing. Pick up. Please. Four rings in and nothing. I need to breathe. The sound of the freezer ventilator is steady. The lights in here buzz. Focus on that. On the water dripping down the side of the wall I'm leaning against, fizzling away to nothing off the back of my neck. What if I just. Pixie, for the love of God please just fucking—

“Hello?”

I almost drop the phone.

“Elle? Elle. I—fuck.”

There's a short pause, and then the background noise disappears. The sound of a door closing. Her voice gets quiet and serious.

“Keon, where are you?”

I feel like I'm breathing through a straw. Every time I open my mouth, clouds of steam billow up around my head. The lights above my head are swirling around and I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to be hyperventilating like this.

“I'm in the freezer,” I tell her. If I let go of this rack I'm going to end up knocking myself out on top of everything.

“...Huh?”

“At the diner. I'm sitting in the freezer with the fucking *breakfast sausages*.”

“Oh. Oh! Ok.”

“Laugh. It's funny.”

“No it’s not.”

“Elle just please.”

“I’m coming to get you.”

“*No!*”

She goes quiet. I peek over the crate to see if anybody’s walking past the window in the freezer door.

“I—I’m sorry. Elle. I just. I don’t need you to—I’m.”

I’m staring at the first aid kit, and the red stain seeping through the towel wrapped around my hand. I learned four years ago that heat can be deafening. You know. Like it builds up inside my head, cloudy, thick. It’s like you could cut into it. I feel it pulsing. It’s this low, buzzing, humming sound that drives me absolutely fucking insane. It gets so loud I can barely think, and then ebbs, comes back, like waves. Again and again. I must be crazy. I feel crazy. I feel like I’m being drowned in heat from the inside. But it doesn’t burn me. It suffocates me. It wants out. I can’t do that. Not again. Water’s dripping down from everything on the racks and shelves around me, making a dark puddle on the cement floor. Meanwhile, a circle directly around where I’m sitting stays perfectly dry.

I hear shuffling on the other end of the line. Voices. I can’t tell what they’re saying because I think Pixie’s covering up the mic. A few seconds later, the shuffling, scraping sound stops, another door opens, and then I hear wind.

“Ok,” Pixie says. “I’m on lunch. I’ll just walk around outside and talk to you. Can I do that?”

“Don’t come here.”

“I won’t. Ok, look, I’m gonna sit down on this bench. You know they built another new Starbucks across the street from our store? I mean, there’s one literally a *block* down. But Apple and Starbucks kind of go together, right?”

“Capitalism.”

She laughs.

“Yup. So people can go get shitty coffee while I fix their phones.”

I lean back against the wall and try to ignore the eighteen-car pileup in my head. The last time this happened was so much worse than this—there’d been no warning. I hadn’t even hurt myself. One second I was standing in line at the advising office to sign up for classes, and the next I’d felt like a fucking meteor had landed in my skull. I barely made it out of the building. That was the day the well-meaning public of A-Gram University witnessed a six-foot-four grown ass man bomb head-first into a fountain. Two days after I moved in at Faraday. After campus police dropped me off back at the house, my clothes soaking wet and full of burn holes, Pixie made me promise I’d call her if it ever happened again.

And here we fucking are.

“Did you have a crazy today?” I ask her.

“Ha! Must be the full moon. I’ve taken six appointments so far, and I needed a manager for four of them. Take your *pick*.”

“Let’s go with crazy number 2.”

“Toilet phone.”

“Tasty.”

“Yeah, well. But then right after that I got to show an older guy how to post pictures of his dog on Facebook. It was awesome.”

I sigh. My head is spinning. My body temperature is still way too high to go back outside. Maybe if I just...let some of it off? Johnny probably thinks I'm nuts. Dinger's gonna have so much to say about my *thing with blood*. At least my chest is loosening up a little. I'm starting to be able to hear myself think. The lights are hanging still.

Pixie shuffles nervously on the other end of the line.

"Keon?"

"Sorry. Still here."

"You sound better. Is it going down?"

"Working on it. Could you just— What about this guy with the dog?"

"Oh! Yeah, he's had this yellow lab for like fifteen years and..."

Pixie goes on at a mile a minute, interrupting herself, backtracking, going on tangents. I honestly don't get a word of it, but it doesn't matter. She keeps talking, so I focus on the fact that there are sounds coming out of this phone and suddenly everything's just slower. I take a few deep breaths because my hands are shaking. It's not often I do what I'm about to do on purpose. I let the bloody towel fall on the floor and the pulsing thing in my head have its way.

The first time I held a flame like this, it exploded, cascaded across the floor, up the walls, and swallowed everything that had ever mattered to me. Now, it just sits there in my palm, rolled up in a flickering orange ball I will probably fear more than anything for the rest of my life. There is no getting over this. But I let it burn until it isn't choking me anymore.

It feels a little like holding something that's alive. And I honestly think it is. I put the phone on speaker and prop it up on the floor next to the first aid kit so I can cup the flame in both hands. It has a heartbeat, or maybe it's just copying mine. It doesn't feel hot, though. Just, solid. Like sticking your hand out a car window, and feeling the wind push back on you even though

it's just air. I haven't figured out what exactly is burning—my flames don't leave soot behind. I've never been able to sustain one longer than a few minutes before it tries to get away from me. The longer I sit here, and the longer Pixie talks, the more I feel the panic creeping up. I'm looking at this literal ball of fire in my hands, half wincing, because I don't know if it'll stay there. It drains me, though. After another minute, the fire dims, and my body feels heavier.

When the flame finally disappears, and I can finally breathe, the cut on my palm is gone.

Pixie stops talking for a little while. Then:

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah,” I tell her, digging in the fist aid kit for something to make it look like I hadn't just pulled a fucking Wolverine. I hold the phone up to my ear with my shoulder and peel open a square of gauze.

“...No damage?”

“I probably thawed out like sixteen hundred dollars' worth of food, but other than that, building's still standing.”

She laughs.

“Well that's good.”

My hand convincingly bandaged, I get up off the floor. My head spins. I catch the side of a shelf just in time to survive the next fifteen seconds of my stomach threatening to walk out. I feel like I could sleep for six years.

“Don't tell Kyle, alright?” I mutter, getting the sudden, violent urge to go outside and smoke. I'm not going to. I promised I wouldn't. “I can't face him with this.”

“Keon, you don't have to explain anything to me. I won't tell him. Ok?”

“...Thanks, Pix.”

“Of course. It’s gonna be ok.”

Is it? I look down at my hand, getting the urge to do something else I haven’t done in years.

I’ve got these tattoos on my wrists—three horizontal black bars about an inch thick. If you look really close, you can just barely make out the thin, raised edges of the lines hidden under the ink. Fifteen on my right wrist, seven on my left.

I’m surprised by how badly I need Pixie to see me differently than everybody else does. How afraid I am of her finding out about the scars on my wrists and what else I thought I could cover up.

“I know,” I tell her, and myself. “I gotta go before they start looking for the body.”

She laughs, but it’s careful. She’s on eggshells and I hate it. She thinks I’m crazy. She has to by now.

“Ok. Call me if you have another attack.”

“I think I’ll be good now.”

“Ok. See you at home.”

“See ya.”

She waits for me to hang up. My phone’s screen flashes black once and a message comes up warning me that it’s gonna turn off because it’s “approaching an unsafe temperature.” I kinda wish somebody’s walking outside in the hallway right now, because they’d get to see a guy standing alone inside freezer laughing at his phone for having the fucking grand tsar of delayed reactions. Oh, oh this is rich. You just can’t make this shit up, and nobody could explain it if they tried. Not Pixie. Not Dinger. Not God. Not one fucking person on this planet has been able to tell me why yet, and I’m getting really tired of asking.

| *Elle.*

I'd been on the ice for maybe ten minutes when Nate appears in the tunnel beneath the bleachers. He wheels towards the bench, his eyes on me the whole time. I come up to the wall and stop as he pushes himself into the box. He's got a triangular black bag slung over his shoulder today, with two hockey sticks poking out of it.

"You beat me today," he says, and sounds surprised.

I grin.

"I can fly remember?"

"It's six-thirty in the morning."

"I can fly *and* couldn't sleep?"

He chuckles, setting the bag down on the floor by the bench. There's a scuffed up Phoenix logo on the bag's front panel, and beneath it, the number 33 embroidered in bright red. The smudged black edges of the numbers, the little tear in the seam by the zipper closure, the Sharpie tally marks on the piece of tape stuck to the side. I feel like I'm looking at some kind of ancient artifact. Like this should be in a museum.

"Ready to try something else?" Nate asks me, taking a roll of white tape out of a compartment in the front pocket of the bag.

"Wait, wait, you're gonna set me loose with something that could be used to induce blunt-force trauma?"

He raises his hands to the empty arena.

“Do *you* see any innocent bystanders?”

“...You?”

“I’m sitting down.”

I frown at him and he laughs.

“Spaz, I think I’ll be fine. Besides,” he shrugs, “stick’s not the issue. It’s the pucks.” He knocks on the glass to the right of the bench. “I’d be *really* impressed if you could get one over this on your first try.” He pauses, and his tone gets sarcastic: “And by the way, teleporting the puck is *illegal* in most American hockey leagues.”

I grin.

“But in Canada it’s ok, right?”

“In Canada everything is ok. Except not wearing a helmet.”

Nate raises an eyebrow at the piece of protective equipment in question, which is currently hanging from my elbow by its straps because it’s a little big and the weight of the cage makes it slide down on my forehead.

“But it’s stupid...” I insist. “I’m not skating right this second.”

“That was my condition, Spaz. I could be sleeping in right now.”

“You never sleep in! You’re like, *allergic* to laziness.”

He grins.

“I *could* be, is what I said.”

“Meh.”

I watch him pull the longer of the two sticks out of the bag and look at its blade. He runs his thumb over the bottom edge. Tilts his head slightly. If he had a thought he doesn’t share it.

Instead, he peels a length of tape from the roll and begins to wind it around the blade, from the end attached to the shaft, outwards. To describe it as “practiced” would kind of... discredit it somehow. I wonder how many times he’d done this. How long it’d been since he’d last done it.

“Come in here and grab the other one,” he says.

I unlatch the door and step into the box. He slides another roll of tape towards me on the bench. I put the helmet down and pick up the second stick. It feels heavy in my hands. Awkward. I suddenly feel very nervous.

“It’s not gonna bite you,” Nate assures me. “Elle, just relax. It’s fine.”

“But...” I start. Falter. I sit down on the bench.

“Don’t tell me you’re backing out already.”

He finishes taping his blade, putting down the roll to pick up a tin of wax, and then looks up at me. That’s what he does. He just looks, and it’s this weightless, non-judgmental kind of look that makes me feel like I can do anything. Like the first time I heard thunder, I thought the world was ending. He sat up for three hours trying to convince me it was just a sound. I didn’t believe him. I didn’t. I was convinced this loud, terrifying thing was just another nightmare filling in for the missing memories, and all of a sudden I didn’t know what was real and what wasn’t. He sat with me while I panicked, despite having to get up at six the next morning to go to lab. He just sat and talked, and he looked at me the way he’s looking at me now. It’s the only thing I’ve never mistrusted. The first memory I have of him, I saw him look up at me from the ice. I saw him look up at me from the hospital bed.

“You know,” he says, rubbing the blue disk of wax over the length of the stick blade.

“The first time I went on the ice, I was three years old. I don’t even really remember it.” He

laughs. “My dad probably strapped a pair of skates on me and threw me out there. He’s always been a ‘sink or swim’ kinda guy.”

I look down at the stick in my lap.

“You’ve been skating your entire life.”

“Yeah. So I mean, even now. I couldn’t forget how even if I tried. I just *always* did it. But that doesn’t mean there weren’t moments I got stuck at a wall somewhere. It happens to everyone.”

I shake my head. There’s a hard knot in my throat I can’t fully explain.

“That’s just it, though. I’m not, like...well I’m scared. I can’t say I’m not scared.” I look up at him and half smile, half sigh. “I’m also...embarrassed?”

“Embarrassed?” He lets the word hang there, like he’s not exactly sure what he should do with it.

My face turns red, very much against my will. He raises his eyebrows and kind of half-smiles.

“You can’t be worried about what I think,” he says. “Spaz, that’s just—”

“How could I not be?” I insist. “I...I mean I want...”

“Elle, breathe.” He lifts his hand up above his head. “You’re way up here. I need you to be down here.” He lowers his hand to waist level. “You are literally just expected to put tape on a stick right now. Nobody’s going in for the draft.”

I’m getting frustrated now. This isn’t what I mean. This isn’t about my hockey-related delusions of grandeur. Sure it would have been great to wind up a freak prodigy, like who doesn’t fantasize about being stupid good at things they’re just *not*? This is irrational. This is like being convinced thunder was trying to kill me, and me specifically, and existed for no other

reason. I feel like I'm trying to *take* something from Nate. It's selfish. It's so. It's *wrong*. But I feel it. This was a bad idea. Maybe we should just go. Where's the closest door? Behind me? I could just...fly through the ceiling...nobody would see if I just disappeared?

It isn't until Nate grabs my hand that I realize I'm shaking.

"Elle."

I look at him but I honestly don't see him. This is how panic works. I latch onto something completely nonsensical and then my tear ducts activate. It's so stupid. It's so, so stupid. My vision becomes a blur of colors and shapes.

I'm kind of far from him on the bench, and he's awkwardly bent forward with his chair wedged against the wall. He shifts uncomfortably, grinning.

"Uh. Ok, hold on."

He lowers the arm rest on his right and lifts himself out of the chair, sliding backwards from the seat and onto the bench itself. Bit of a process. I feel him near me and wince as he tries to pull my hands away from my face. His hands are gentle. His voice is quiet and soft.

"Elle, head up."

"Don't tell me how to live my life..." I mumble.

He laughs lightly.

"Jesus, Spaz. I'll add stick tape to the list of stuff that makes you short circuit. Should it go before dark places and after gluten? Or between doorbells and getting rained on."

I slump against him and he puts an arm around me.

"Put it next to marshmallow Peeps."

I expect him to laugh but he doesn't.

I lift my head and Nate's looking down at me, thinking. His jacket is cool against my cheek. I can feel his heartbeat. Even, calm, and slow.

"What's wrong?" he asks. His voice hums low in his chest, and I get a weird, confusing feeling in my stomach that has nothing to do with my irrational fears. I sit up.

"I don't belong in here," I blurt. "This is yours. Not mine. I shouldn't have asked you for it."

He takes a deep breath, his gaze drifting up to the ceiling, pausing, and falling back down again to the stands on the other side of the rink. Everything he does, he does just like this. Carefully. Taking his time. Never a word wasted or an intention unfulfilled. Nate moves forward with the momentum of shifting continents, at a pace nobody can rush.

"This one time," he begins, smiling wistfully, "we got snowed in here overnight. It was the middle of January, I think, my sophomore year. It'd been tanking like thirteen inches for days and a couple of the guys thought it would be funny to pile all this snow into the showers and build an igloo, I guess?" He laughs. "We had these big bins on wheels, right, for when they shovel powder off the ice before the zamboni comes out. So we filled them with snow and dumped them out on the shower floor."

I can't help but snicker into my hands.

"I can't imagine the *mess*."

"Oh yeah. Coach was *furious*. I mean at least we kept it in the showers where the small lake left over when all that crap melted could just go down the drains but, point being. *Why*. I don't think any of us really got that far. We just wanted to fill the showers with snow so we did it."

"And you got stuck in the building?"

Nate shrugs, smiling as he leans forward to rest his forearms on the wall. He's looking out over the ice but his eyes are distant. Remembering.

“Dumbassery took us a couple hours. By the time any of us realized, a blizzard had blown over and all of a sudden there was a foot and a half in the parking lot and it wasn't letting up anytime soon. It was me, Jo, Ringer, Major and Chase. Fucking Chase.” He shakes his head. “I'll give you one guess who's bright idea it had been in the first place.”

I lean forward on the wall next to Nate, and he turns his head to look at me.

“But you all obviously went along with the idea,” I object.

He lets out a chuckle and nods.

“Yeah. But then again, you gotta remember this is two dozen guys pretty much constantly together, and our favorite pass-time was seeing how much shit we could give each other before somebody got decked.”

“Or snowed in.”

“Or that.”

“Nate?”

“Hn.”

“Isn't this one of those stories that just doesn't...belong to anybody who wasn't there?”

Nate looks down at his hands on the wall. He runs his thumb along a deep scratch in the dark red plastic border on top of the boards. He seems fascinated by it. As in, that particular one. He's always been focused on the details, how they fit together like the parts in a machine. Honestly sometimes I wonder how he functions, paying so much attention to everything—*everything*—around him, and the second you wanna take a look at how *he* works, Nate Kyle looks down and falls silent.

“Maybe back then,” he says finally. “Now? Honestly, sometimes it feels like the entire life I had before just flat out belongs to someone else. And it’s not just that I can’t walk anymore. Reality’s different, you know? I’m different.”

I poke the side of the roll of tape over and over with my fingernail, leaving a row of little divots.

“I don’t know,” I reply. “You’ve always been the same to me.”

Nate spreads both hands flat over the top of the wall, the tips of his square fingers wrapping over the edge. His grip tightens, then relaxes. He clenches and unclenches his jaw. His blue-green eyes fixed directly ahead.

“I want you to have this,” he says. “It’s cathartic for me. I can’t really use any of it anymore, so I mean.” He looks at me and smiles. “I guess bringing you and Tarik in here makes me feel like I don’t totally have to let that part of myself go. You know? You don’t complain nearly as much as Tarik does, though. Haha.”

I don’t really have anything to say. He just turns his gaze back to the ice and lets out a long breath. I feel utterly stupid, selfish, thankful, and honored. All at the same time. But I don’t have to say anything. That’s not how Nate communicates, anyway.

I pick my stick up off the floor and wind tape around the blade, starting from the heel. I get about two or three inches done when he leans over.

“You want each time around to overlap by about half,” he says, placing his hands over mine, gently unwinding my last coil of tape and readjusting it. “Like that.”

His hands dwarf mine. Square, warm, his palms calloused from pushing his chair, but “rough” is the last word I’d ever use to describe anything about him. He lets me go almost

immediately, but my brain stalls. Not altogether sure why. I'd never been so glad the cold in here makes my face turn red.

“Spaz?”

“Oh. Right,” I sputter, snapping out of it. “Overlap by half. So like...?”

I make a few more turns and look up. He nods. His watch produces a high-pitched ringing sound, and he glances down at it.

“You’ve got it from here. I’m gonna go let these doorknobs in.”

“...Who?”

Nate slides back into his chair, then backs out of the box. He has a wry grin on his face.

“You’ll see. They’ve been bugging me to meet you forever so they’ll probably be really obnoxious. They’ll cool it in just a second.”

“Wait, meet *me*?” I turn around on the bench. “I’m worried. Why am I worried? Do I need to be worried?”

“Haha. Elle. It’s fine, I promise.” He reaches over the wall to nudge my arm.

“...Ok.”

He hesitates, his gaze lingering on my face in a way that’s just a little different from how he usually looks at me. Just a little. But enough to make my stomach do a flip. He looks away for an instant, then back as he tilts my chin up gently.

“Head up,” he murmurs. Then he lets go, and I’m suddenly very light headed.

My face lights up like a bonfire as I watch him wheel away. I lift my hand to my cheek. My stomach is turning uncomfortably. One, I don’t know what just happened. Two, it feels a whole hell of a lot like something’s changed. And three, I’m still hella worried about who’s

about to come down that tunnel. But it's ok. It's just tape on a stick. Showers full of snow. Dumb ideas. Breathe.

| **Keon.**

My 19th Century Lit class is the tits.

I've been sitting here staring at this Ramones hoodie the girl in front of me draped over the back of her chair. Half of the logo is gone because she cut a huge chunk of the collar out. Why do girls do that? I mean it's the Ramones, but God-damn. Nobody deserves that. Except the person who decided to schedule this class at 7am.

"Keon."

I look up.

The professor is this old guy who comes in every day in the same pair of black jeans, literature-themed tie, and a blazer. Has us call him Todd. And he really does look like a Todd. Maybe a buck twenty soaking wet. Always smiling. Round glasses he keeps taking off and putting in his mouth when he lectures. You know the kind of person you'd expect to have like tea tables and junk and more Persian rugs in his house than square footage? I ran into him once on my way to a completely different class and somehow he sniffed out the hockey in less than thirty seconds. Found out all about him growing up in Saskatchewan playing pond when they still used straight-edged sticks and you'd strap the skate blades right onto your shoes. *You Canadian?* Oh, no my family is Finnish. *Your name's Gaelic, you know?* No I didn't know that. *It is! Means God's grace!* Well lovely ducks.

Right now, Todd puts his copy of Goethe down on the table at the front of the room and peers at me through his glasses.

“What do you think about Werther and Lotte’s relationship?” he asks.

The rest of the class gets quiet. There’s maybe twenty of us, and the desks are positioned in two rows in a horseshoe shape so everybody’s always facing one other. “Seminar style,” it said on the syllabus. Like I said: the tits.

Todd leans against his table and nods at me encouragingly. He looks like my grandfather. The same grandfather who thought I should have gone to Military School.

“Go on,” he says. “Speak freely.”

I lean back in my chair. Well, now that you’ve pulled my arm...

“I think Werther’s kind of a tool,” I tell him. “He gets caught up with this random chick’s been leading his ass up and down for weeks. And when he’s not pining over her, he’s talking about kids and flowers and blades of grass and shit. Who *does* that?”

Ramones girl whips around in her seat and glares at me.

“So, what. Lotte’s leading him on, so he kills himself?”

Todd points at us with his glasses.

“No, Keon, say a little more about that last part. What about the way Werther is behaving is unrealistic to you?”

“Everything. I mean, he’s what, twenty? He’s like anybody in this room. Blown out of proportion, sure, but I think the point is he’s got no idea what the hell he’s doing. He spends all his time thinking about this idealized, dreamland version of the world where nothing ever goes wrong and people just end up happy no matter what because life is *beautiful*. That’s how he sees

Lotte, isn't it? He won't take no for an answer because in his head it can't be no. It can't *not* work out."

I stop, watching Ramones for a hint she's gonna jump down my throat again. Figures. I mean I guess when you walk around with both arms tattooed, one-inch plugs and ripped jeans people don't tend to assume very much of you.

Todd crosses his arms, studying me with a kind of half smile on his face. Fucking hell. I was hoping to just chill out in the back of the room for the semester, skate through my final, get my B and move on with my life. Now he's gonna fucking expect *intelligence*. I put my pen down and sigh.

"I think when Werther realizes he's wrong and his entire view of the world comes down on his head, that's what drives him to shoot himself. Lotte's just the face of it, you know? The thing to latch onto so it makes sense to him? He's been struggling with this for a lot longer than he's known her. I don't think this book's about their relationship at all. I think it's about how much it sucks to grow up and find out real life's a shithole." I grin at Ramones' side eye. "I'm sorry. Life is an *anal cavity*."

The rest of the class—Todd included—breaks out in laughs.

I manage to slide through the rest of the hour without having to talk again. It's easier to just not. Yeah, people think I'm an idiot who slacks off and never does his homework (and sometimes that is absolutely fucking true), but I'd rather them think that than start to wonder stuff like, *Hey, do you wear red contacts all the time?* Or, *Wow, you had your teeth sharpened, that's kinda weird.* Or, my personal favorite, *Do you need help?* Me? Oh, no, I'm your regular old freak. Just woke up one night and before I burned my own house down I found out super

powers fuck with your face too. If I just keep my head down and my mouth shut nobody will ever have to know what that fire did to me and what it took away.

At least Kyle and Pixie never ask any God-damn questions. Maybe that's why I stayed. I don't know. Maybe it's because they're not afraid of me. Kyle's not afraid of anything, and Pixie's the only one who can look me in the face every day and I've never seen her flinch.

I get about twenty feet from the classroom door when Ramones flat out sprints after me. I've already got my headphones in, man, leave me *alone*. But she fucking grabs me by the shoulders and kind of skids along for a few steps before I finally stop. She bumps into me.

“Woah, wow,” she says, righting herself. “Heh. You're a lot stronger than you look.”

I look down at her, frowning.

“Thanks. Do you need something?”

“Jeez, guy. Nice to meet you too.”

She crosses her arms and glares. I get the impression she does that a lot. She's wearing the Ramones hoodie now—it sits off her freckled shoulders thanks to the hack job she'd performed on it. She has choppy black hair and sixteen and a half different piercings in each ear. A pinup style tattoo of a topless mermaid on her forearm. In a different world where I'm not into dick she might've been my type. But we're not in that world, and she looks like she could lay me out with her eyes closed. Clutch ink though.

“Look,” I say. “I'm not trying to be a prick—”

“That's funny,” she grins. “But relax. I just wanted to say sorry for earlier.”

“...Huh?”

“Sorry! You know, the thing you say when you judge someone and you shouldn’t have. So yeah. I’m sorry.” She adjusts her bag on her shoulder and shrugs. “I legit thought you were some slacker douche here on scholarship.”

“And you’re blunt as hell.”

“Yeah... I’m working on it? Haha.”

She smiles. I’m running out of emotional stamina and I can feel my body heat climbing. I *really* need to go somewhere with less shit that could catch on fire.

“Ok, I appreciate it, but I’m—”

“Super gay. I know. Me too. Totally obvi. I’m not flirting with you, don’t worry, just being a grown up. Actually there’s someone else—”

“*Max!*”

We both look up.

A ginger rushes out of the classroom, tugging on his jacket. A brown canvas bag dangles from his arm. Every pore on his body *exudes* Polo. Blue cardigan. Khaki chinos. Clark fucking Kent glasses. Right down to the polka-dot dress socks. I don’t know where to look, I’m in so much physical pain, and having serious trauma-induced flashbacks from every Catholic school my parents stuck me in right up through Eastlan University.

His eyes are bright green.

Ramones turns to him as he comes up.

“Peej. This is Keon.”

“Oh, hi,” Ginger sputters.

He's still half tied up in getting his jacket on. He pulls his other arm through its sleeve, readjusts his bag, and sticks his hand out to shake mine. After a few seconds, his expression slides from open to confused.

"I'm not sick," he says, retracting his hand slightly.

"Oh. No. I mean, sorry."

I just. I don't know if my hands are too hot. Sometimes I can't tell. Sometimes I just. Max raises her eyebrows at me. Keets you're being fucking weird, get a fucking grip will you *please*.

I take my hand out of my pocket and shake his hand once. His eyes linger on me. I look down at the floor.

"O-kay..." Ramones laughs—I guess her name is Max.

I shove my hands back in my pockets. Max's just got this half smile on her face like she knows everything there is to know.

Ginger looks down at his phone, and then back up at Max.

"Uh, are you two working on a project together, or...?"

"No," I reply, turning.

Max pipes up.

"Hey, where are you going? I was gonna invite you to lunch with us!"

The fuck you are.

"Hey! *Keon!*"

I turn my music up and fling open the door to the stairwell. She takes a few steps after me. Maybe it's the red that makes her stop. When I look back from the door, and she meets my eyes for the first time. And flinches.

There's a narrow alley for trash cans between Faraday and the house next door. It's also the perfect place to let off steam because Kyle's car blocks the view from the street, and there's nothing quite as satisfying as ripping clappers off a brick wall.

There's a reason even the bambiest bender to have ever bent knows what the hell a slap shot is and what it should sound like. When you spot that opening, all your gas bottlenecked into that one decision, wind up. If you ask me, the "it" moment of the game is a virtually invisible one. There's sixty minutes of big hits, big plays, and big saves—it's all got nothing on the tenth of a second you've put every fiber into that thirty degree flex in your twig, and that thing sitting on the ice, waiting, isn't a puck anymore. It's a bomb.

I've just got a rubber ball right now, but I figure it's for the best. Kyle downgraded me last week when I banked a puck off the back wall of the alley and busted the lattice behind the house. Pixie still hasn't forgiven me for murdering her tomato plants.

I fire one too high and it bounces back, off the ground, and over my head. Flying *fuck* Kyle's *car*.

I whirl around expecting to add a broken window to the list of shit I owe him, but instead I find the man himself, his hockey bag over his shoulder, probably just back from the rink. The ball is in his raised fist. Pixie's standing next to him with two pizza boxes.

"Maybe we should get a net," Kyle says, tossing the ball back to me.

"No, don't, next week I'll get it," I tell him. "Hey Pix."

"Hey. You're back really early?"

"Manager made me take the day off, and I only have one class on Tuesdays."

"Oh, ok. We've got lunch if you want."

I pick up my school bag from the ground and follow them around to the front door. I notice there's a Pixie-sized stick in Kyle's bag, and that she's walking with a slight limp. I grin.

"How was skate?" I ask her.

She glares at me.

"I met *the boys*."

Kyle laughs as he unlocks the door and pushes himself over the threshold.

"Oh, it wasn't that bad," he says.

"I fell so many times I think my buns switched *sides*."

"But you got one in!"

"Closely followed by the rest of me."

"Haha. Woulda taken Liles with you too."

"Are you kidding me? She's like *four times my size*. If she hadn't gotten out of the net when I went down you'd be bringing me home in a *bucket* right now!"

Pixie sets the pizza down on the coffee table, hobbles to the couch, and tips into it face first.

"Oh, glory dee, my *body parts*."

Kyle shakes his head, bending down to unlace his shoes.

"Wait wait," I interject. "Liles? As in *Lily Parker*, the Falcs' goalie?"

Kyle looks up at me and shrugs.

"Yeah, we played together for Phoenix for a year."

"Well no shit I was there, but you didn't *tell me* you were gonna have a fucking NHLer come out to teach Bunny Knots here how to *shoot*?"

"Hey, that's Captain Bunny Knots to you."

Kyle picks up his shoes, grinning.

“She did me a favor and you were in class,” he says. “Besides, you peeled ice in her face last time you two were under the same roof, and if I remember correctly, she kicked your shit in for it.”

“Yeah, and how many people can say they got their shit kicked in by *Liles fucking Parker*.”

I flop down onto the couch next to Pixie.

“Fuckers.”

She reaches up to pat my arm without lifting her head.

“There there,” she mumbles into the throw pillow. “One day when you’re big and strong, Senpai will notice you.”

I laugh, swatting her with the other pillow. She protests by curling into a ball and squeaking.

“Who all else was there?” I ask her.

“Uuumm, all the like, code names kind of mixed me up but this one guy was very large and very...*huggy*?”

Kyle pipes up from the kitchen. I hear the opening and closing of the fridge, a cabinet.

“That’s Major. And that’s a very accurate description of him.”

“Oh yeah,” I say. “Your two-ton D-man. I thought he went to Minnesota?”

“He got reassigned at the end of his two-year.” Kyle comes around the counter with a stack of paper plates and a couple bottles of water. He hands me one.

“Aw man, really?”

“Yeah, didn’t pan out the way I think he’d been expecting, but he’s been playing on in the minors and working his way back. He’s got a kid now.”

Pixie sits up to take a paper plate from Kyle and flips open the top pizza box.

“You shoulda seen me getting my butt kicked by that three-year-old,” she says to me. She points to her pizza—it’s covered in green. “This one’s no gluten by the way. So I won’t die. The other one’s got things that used to have faces.”

Kyle just looks up at the ceiling and shakes his head.

“You think you’re sore now, wait till you start skating drills. Today was cake.”

She looks at him, bug-eyed, and then at me like I’m supposed to have a solution.

“Hey, you wanted the full experience,” I tell her. “If you learn nothing else, learn the three-word mantra.”

“The what?”

Kyle counts it off:

“I’m. Good. Coach.”

“Wait, so wait. What’d you actually say to Jerry when you popped your shoulder that one time at the GLI?”

Kyle shakes his head, inhaling through his teeth.

“Man, I’d kill my mother all the way out on the East Coast if I repeated that.”

“Ha! Is that why Jer was laughing so hard?”

“And why she double shifted me as soon as I was taped up and back on the bench.”

Pixie gapes in horror. Kyle laughs.

“It was only a partial dislocation!”

“Jesus Christ.”

“I’m tellin ya, Pix, it’s the best game on earth.”

Pixie’s looking at us like we’re insane. Kyle’s over there doing the closest thing to giggling he’s physically capable of doing. I’m having a hard time focusing on food when it feels almost like it’s us and forty other guys sitting in the hotel lobby waiting for the busses home—right back to 30 hours a week of the same fucking shit we’d been doing for eighteen years. Didn’t matter that we’d just spent sixty minutes plus overtime beating the spit out of each other. Maybe we were insane. But not right now. Right now, it’s so easy to forget everything and just *be*.

Pixie looks down at her slice of rabbit food, tearing pieces of the crust apart with her fingers. After a second she just kind of ducks her head and smiles. I glance up at Kyle. He’s quiet now, looking out the front window as he opens a water bottle, brain completely somewhere else, and he doesn’t see Pixie’s gaze drift from her plate, to him, and back again. It’s moronic. I mean the universe can’t possibly like to fuck with people this much.

I sit back on the couch with my food and think about the way Pixie looks at Kyle but doesn’t say anything, how in literally *only* this case he’s just too much of a blockhead to notice, and wonder who’s fault it is. Whether we’ll just sit here waiting for the damn bus forever. Maybe we could, if we just keep letting ourselves forget our lives will never be as simple as they were when all we had to worry about was *practice* in the morning, and *living* only afterwards.

I also think about Max’s friend the ginger and his God-damn green eyes.

“Keon, that pizza’s already cooked!”

“Oh, *fuck*.”

I jump, dropping the smoking plate onto the hardwood.

“Fuck. Sorry.”

Pixie lifts the plate with a laugh. The cat comes out of his cave to sniff at the charred remains on the floor. He looks up at me like I'd done him the worst kind of cruelty.

“I think you hurt his soul a little bit,” Pixie chuckles. She reaches over to grab a piece of sausage off Kyle's plate and tosses it. The cat bolts. Kyle says something about not feeding him junk. Pixie fires back that it's her cat that she paid for “all by her own self.” And me, amazed at how this last month has been the closest thing to normal I've had in four years.

| *Elle.*

I find Keon sitting on the roof with a cigarette pinched between his fingers. Not smoking it—just staring, the smoldering embers fluttering away with the wind.

“Hey,” I whisper, half afraid of disturbing him.

His eyes flicker towards me and then back to the cigarette. I take it as an invitation. Or at least not a “please go away.”

I climb onto the balcony railing, crawl up onto the slope of the roof, and sit next to him with my knees pulled up to my chest. The breeze up here makes me shiver.

“You missed dinner,” I tell him. “I was surprised. I thought hungry was your natural state.”

He shrugs.

I try to laugh, but my voice seems so loud up here. So enclosed, despite the openness of the purple-gray sky above us. Keon’s eyes glint like deadened rubies.

“I still don’t know, Pixie,” he mutters, and his voice breaks on the name he gave me.

“Don’t know what?”

He turns his face to the sky and sighs.

“If anyone’s listening.”

He laughs, but his laugh is quiet and bitter.

“Shit stinks,” he says, throwing the cigarette away. “Don’t know why I ever did it.”

Keon watches it roll a foot or so down the roof before it bursts into a puff of flame, smoke, and fluttering ashes. Gone.

I look up at his face and his eyes turn down to look at mine. The wind is stinging my cheeks. My fingers are starting to ache.

“Please don’t go,” I tell him, not ask him. My teeth chatter and I don’t sound nearly as authoritative as I’d hoped.

The corner of his mouth twitches upwards.

“You’re turning blue,” he says, draping one long arm around my shoulders and pulling me against his side like a child. He radiates warmth, like a person does, but Keon’s got a brilliant thing trapped inside him. You can see it once in a while, when you look at him and he looks back at you, and it leaves ghostly patterns floating around even when you close your eyes. His leather jacket is smooth against my cheek. He smells like cinder and Keon.

“I don’t want you to go,” I insist.

He brings his other arm around me and I’m not shivering anymore. He rests his chin on the top of my head.

“Who said I was going anywhere?” he asks me.

“Every time you spoke to me this week it felt like you were saying goodbye.”

“...Pixie...”

I hug him around the middle and press my face into his chest. My throat tightens and the tears bubble over, hot and heavy, soaking into his T-shirt.

“You and Nate are all I have,” I sob. “Please just stay. We’re listening. I’m listening.”

His arms tighten around me.

“Pix I—I’m not gonna do anything...”

“Don’t. *Don’t!*”

“I won’t.”

“Promise.”

I lift my head and he gapes down at me, shaken, full of guilt, and something else.

Something I can tell he hasn’t felt in a while, because it surprises him.

“Promise me.”

His eyes search mine intently, his brow slowly furrowing, then softening again. Then he looks to the side, sighs. I tilt my head to keep his gaze.

“There’s a lot of back story, you know,” he tells me, smiling weakly at my persistence.

“I’ve done a lot of things I’m not proud of.”

“Dunno, don’t care,” I inform him, swallowing the next round of waterworks. “Only you I know is this one. And I love this one. You’re my friend. If you hurt yourself, I’ll push you off this roof.”

He laughs.

“Don’t, I’m serious. You’re not moving until you *promise* me that you will get up every day, put your stupid hoodie on and go to work and school and come back the hell home where you belong, you big gangly shithead.”

He tries to hold it in, can’t. He laughs so hard he rocks back and forth, shoulders bouncing, a hand pressed over his mouth like he might explode. I glare at him for a second, but eventually I can’t help but laugh too.

“God I am a shithead,” he mutters, catching his breath. He lies back on the roof, which I don’t like so much because now I’m cold again, and looks at me.

“Ok?” I ask him.

He tilts his head, grinning, and offers me his hand to shake.

“Ok,” he says. “I promise.”

I smile, letting out the breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding.

“Ha ha and all that,” I say, “but I’m not joking.”

“I know,” he says. “I don’t wanna go anywhere.”

He crosses his arms under his head and clicks his teeth.

“There’s an...important day coming up, and it’s a little rough on me.”

“What day?”

He shrugs.

“Just a family thing. Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry I scared you. Maybe a while ago there’d have been a reason to be, but not now.” He grins. “And besides. I’ve got four years of obnoxious in the tank and Kyle just *thinks* he’s in the clear.”

I chuckle, hugging my knees again.

“Oy.”

“I know, aren’t you lucky?”

“Yeah,” I say, getting up. “I’d say so. Now let’s go inside already, it’s freezing up here.”

Keon smiles in a slow, soft way you don’t see very often, and certainly not if you don’t pay attention. Isn’t that all anyone really wants? For someone to pay attention?

“You say something about dinner before?” he asks me hopefully as he hops down onto the balcony.

“I left you a plate in the microwave,” I reply.

“*Bomb.*”

Keon's different after that. Quieter. I find him on the roof more often, and when he speaks, it's like he's talking to a wall not expecting an answer back, and he's always so bewildered when an answer comes anyway. I get the feeling he lied to me. I get the feeling he's sorry he had to.

| *Eight Years Ago:*

Anja's sitting cross-legged under the dining room table with a doll in each hand and she looks very serious. Sounds like I just walked in mid-wedding.

"Do you promise to be nice to each other and not yell or fight ever ever?" she asks the groom. Waits for a response. Then turns to the bride.

"Good. And do *you* promise too?"

Another pause. She nods, satisfied.

She puts the groom carefully down on the ground to push her blonde hair out of her face and rub her nose. Her braid's coming apart. I notice when she sits up on her knees that the cardigan of her school uniform is buttoned wrong. She sniffs and rubs her nose again.

I try to not make any noise as I put my backpack and duffel bag on the floor, sliding down to sit against the wall as she picks up the groom. She looks at him, chewing on her upper lip. Pondering.

"I don't have a baby doll," she says to him, apologetically. Then to the bride: "But maybe it's better. Because if you don't have a baby you can just be nice all the time. And you won't have to break your promise."

Anja's five years old. She's smart. She's kind. She never complains about anything, spends most of her time by herself, doing *this*. Pretending. Hiding under the table having conversations like this with herself because nobody else listens. In what world should a five-

year-old have to worry about things like that? She doesn't need a sixteen-year-old brother to fill in for her disappointments; she needs her parents to stop constantly disappointing her.

She looks up and sees me sitting by the door and her blue eyes light up.

“Keon!”

She drops the dolls, crawls out from under the table, and runs over.

“Hey, Annie,” I say, grinning as she throws both arms around my neck. When she pulls away, I fix the buttons on her sweater and tug the skirt of her jumper back down into place.

“Mom get you from school today?”

“No, Sofi did.”

The nanny. I mean I shoulda known. Our parents sleep in the big room upstairs in this mausoleum of a house, and that's about the extent of their relationship with us.

“Ok. Where's Sofi now?”

“In the living room.”

“Why aren't you in the living room?”

“Because Sofi's boring. She's watching old people TV.”

“Fair enough,” I laugh. “Let's go change out of your school clothes ok?”

She looks at me for a second, then down, her little hands white against the burgundy of my uniform blazer. She picks at the edge of the school crest embroidered on the pocket. Trinity Boys' Prep, it says.

“Why's your eye like that?” she asks me.

I wince slightly.

“I fell at practice today. No big deal.”

Her brow furrows and she chews on her lip.

“You fall lots,” she says.

“Yeah,” I sigh, smiling at her. Don’t think she buys it. “I’m no good at hockey’s the problem.”

Anja looks up at me under those ridiculously long eyelashes and shrugs.

“You’re good at everything,” she mumbles.

“Annie, it’s not your job to worry about me,” I tell her, gently tugging what’s left of her braid out of her fidgeting hands. “You know if you keep pulling at your hair like that it’s all gonna fall out.”

She gives me a horrified look, both hands flying to the top of her head.

“Nooo!”

“Well then don’t pull it!”

“Keooooon!”

“Whaaat?”

“Say it’s not gonna!”

I poke her stomach and she giggle-scowls at me.

“It’s not gonna.”

She makes me promise, and I do, but I wonder if she believes me. She’d heard all kinds of promises that didn’t mean anything. Promises to come home earlier from work. To pick her up from school. To stop arguing over nothing. I wonder if she’s afraid I’ll break mine too. I’ve been trying to figure out a way to convince her I’d rather die.

I get up from the floor. I’ve got my backpack, but she insists on carrying my hockey bag—dragging it, really. It’s bigger than she is. She doesn’t notice me grab the bottom handle as we go up the stairs.

Anja's grave is marked with a rectangle of white granite that says: Beloved daughter and sister. I hate that fucking rock. I hate those four tired words. But I come here every year on November 2nd, clean the dirt out of the letters. Stare at her name.

"Happy 13th, Baby Girl," I tell her.

I don't know what to believe when it comes to God anymore, but if You're real, could You tell her I'm sorry the weather's always crud on her birthday?

| *Nate.*

I know something's very wrong the second Tarik lurks into the open from the upstairs hallway. First, because it's six in the morning. And second, because it's like watching a thing that used to be dead suddenly decide to stop being that way. He reaches the bottom of the stairs and glares at me under his hood like I'd pulled a wooden stake on him.

"Jesus," I say. "Rough night?"

He grins through the dark circles.

"Diff-EQ can suck my entire ass," he mutters, skulking into the kitchen.

"You fall out of bed? I heard a noise."

"Cat."

"Cat stays with Elle in the morning."

"You've got a ghost, then."

"Tarik."

"Will you chill?" He turns his head to look back at me. "Thanks for the room, by the way. Couch was railing me."

"Thanks for paying rent," I reply, going back to my eggs. I wonder who he thinks he's lying to, and why he thinks he has to do it. Something's really off, and I mean aside from his usual way with words.

He sits at the counter with a nod.

“I’ll get you back for the gear in another week.”

“Don’t sweat it. Just don’t kill yourself with the extra hours. Nobody’s getting anybody back like that.”

“Brah. I said chill.”

He watches me pour the eggs into a hot pan.

“You make eggs with olive oil?”

“I make everything with olive oil.”

“Fuckin guideo.”

“The hell you doing, Tarik.”

“Moping hardcore so you’ll let me have whatever the fuck those eggs mutated into to smell like God-damn adultery. Be a pal will ya.”

I don’t like the way he’s slouched on the stool. He’s looking at me, but it’s like he sees right through me. He has his hood up, but I can see his eyes are glassy.

“Are you...?”

“Lit as a fuckin Christmas tree. Hah.”

“At *six in the morning*?”

He shrugs.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“Tarik what are you on.”

“*Pfft.*”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Ain’t got nothin to do with this.”

He isn't drunk. I can't smell it on him, and he's not slurring his words, not falling over. Just high off his God-damn stupid ass. I push the pan off the burner and reach for the phone on the counter.

"Hey, *hey!*" Tarik snaps, swatting at the phone. "Don't. No don't. It's fine. I'll burn through this in like fifteen."

"*What?*"

"My metabolism's a sunuva. You know? Because *fwoom*." He puts his head down on the counter. "Fuckin. Can't even get a good trip anymore since superpowers took a big lavender-scented shit on my life." He pulls his hood down over his face and mutters something else I don't catch.

I try to text Elle on my watch.

"Don't," Tarik mutters without looking up. "Don't call her down here. I don't need an ambulance. I don't want her to see this. I don't."

He grinds his forehead into the counter, back and forth, both hands gripping the back of his head.

"...Tarik."

After another second he gets really still.

"How do you do it?" he asks me suddenly, still not looking up.

I push myself slowly around to the other side of the counter.

"Do what?"

"*Deal,*" he laughs, bitterly.

"...What happened that night, Tarik? Four years ago."

"Hn, yeah I'm trying to forget. Why do you think I'm so fucked up right now?"

“Are you really gonna burn though it or did you just say that so I wouldn’t call an ambulance.”

“I’m really gonna burn through it. But don’t do the other thing either. I don’t wanna hurt anyone else.”

“...Else?”

I wrench my hand back the instant I touch his shoulder. *Hot*. Baked asphalt, third-degree burns hot. He recoils, glaring at me in horror.

“See? *See?*” he seethes. “Don’t fucking. Don’t *ever* fucking—”

He grips the sides of his head and curls in at the shoulders. He’s coming down off whatever he’d taken like a sack of bricks. His hands are shaking. His breaths short and choppy, like he’d just sprinted from here to campus and back.

“I’m sorry,” he stammers. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

He sways in the stool.

“Tarik—!”

He collapses. I catch him like I’d caught Elle the other day on the ice, slowing his fall so he landed without hurting himself, but he knocks the stool over and it crashes onto the hardwood.

“Dammit,” Tarik mutters into his hands. “Dammit, *dammit*.”

I hear footsteps, and Elle on the stairs.

“Nate?” she calls. “Is everything ok?”

Tarik can barely keep his eyes open, but the look on his face is desperate. Pleading.

“I’m fine,” I call back. “I knocked a stool over, sorry I woke you up. Again.”

“It’s ok. Now I’m up. Can I take the car? I’ve got work after class.”

“Sure.”

“Thanks much.”

Elle goes back up to her room. I hear the door close, the shower come on. When I look back down, Tarik’s leaning up against the bottom of the counter with his head between his knees.

“She’s gone,” I tell him. “Tarik what did you do to yourself.”

“It’s Valium. I just. I wanted to sleep, Kyle. I just wanted to sleep, but I can’t. I burn through it too quick, no matter how much I take. I *can’t*.”

“...Jesus, man.”

“I told you. He’s got nothing to do with this. Nobody’s got anything to do with this.”

He looks up at me. It’s tough to look back. It is. His eyes are a relentless fire red like something out of a movie, bloodshot and sunken into his face. He looks like he hasn’t slept in a year.

“How do you do it,” he asks me again.

“Not with drugs,” I tell him. “Not anymore.” I look down at my hand on my knee, and can’t feel the pressure. But for a year after I got home I’d lived all day, every day, in the worst pain of my life, and the only answer, it seemed then, was to make it so I couldn’t feel at all. I’d broken my body, and at the time it’d felt like no one understood that what was left of it needed to recover. Still need to.

“Listen to me,” I say. “You’ve gotta put it down, whatever you’re carrying. You can’t just ignore it.”

“It’s hard, Kyle.”

“I know it is.”

Tarik’s head thumps back against the counter. Then he closes his eyes, and nods.

“If I tell you, you can’t tell Elle. You’ve gotta promise me you won’t.”

“Anything you say stays between us,” I tell him.

“I know? I *know*. Ugh, dammit.”

He takes a breath and it catches. His head falls forward again.

“My parents kept it from getting on the news,” he says, his voice shaking. “They hid it from everyone. They had great lawyers. Hah. God. I didn’t meant to do it. It just. It just happened, Kyle. I couldn’t control it. She was only *nine*.”

I get a chill in the pit of my stomach.

“Keon, who was?”

“My sister. Anja.” His voice breaks on her name, and with every word after that he sinks further down against the counter. “I went to see her yesterday. She would’ve been thirteen. She would’ve started high school this year, you know? It’s like...I just wonder, like if she would’ve liked math—it’s the only thing I’m really good at so I could’ve helped her if she needed it but I don’t think she would’ve, you know, because she was so *smart*. Like I’m a fucking doornail compared, Kyle, you don’t understand. She just. She paid *attention* to things, you know?” He chokes. “You know? But ya fucked all that up didn’t you Keets you fucking piece of shit, you fucking—”

“Tarik, slow down—”

“*No!*” he sobs. “I can’t *sleep* all I can fucking remember is the fire and the smoke and way the house shook when the ceiling—and Annie... God. Hah. Fucking. Oh my *God*. All that’s left of her’s a fucking *rock*, Kyle, and it’s *my fault*.” He gasps, grinds his fists into his forehead, shaking, tears at his hair. I’ve never seen somebody in agony like this. Never.

Tarik looks up. His eyes are bloodshot and his face is streaming.

“...Please,” he begs. “I don’t want pity. Not from you. You’ve gotta understand why it can’t be from you.”

I slowly lower my hand from my mouth. I can’t do anything but sit here and try to absorb what he’d just told me. He’s looking up at me like he’s expecting me to say something and I just can’t. There’s no logic to it. None of this even feels real.

“...Keon?”

Tarik freezes, horrified. I turn around to see Elle float down from the ceiling like a ghost, landing soundlessly on the floor behind us. She’s still wearing shorts and a T-shirt. The shower upstairs is still running.

“I’m...sorry,” she stammers. I can hear she’s trying to control herself. Her voice shakes. Tarik is glaring at her like she’d betrayed him. And something else, too, but I’m the only one who can see it coming. Elle takes a step towards him.

“Keon,” she mutters. “I didn’t mean to. I just—*Keon!*”

It happens all at once. Tarik stands so suddenly Elle jumps back. I push myself between them. Tarik’s next step connects with the floor. I lift my hand, and a shockwave rips through the kitchen, sending him sprawling backwards onto the hardwood like a rag doll. Kitchen stuff flies everywhere. Cabinet doors slam against their frames. My mug of tea shoots off the counter onto the floor and shatters. The stack of mail on the counter scatters into the hallway. Tarik lands backwards on the hardwood and gapes up at me, and he’s afraid. I can see it on his face.

“I was...I was gonna leave,” he stammers. “I wasn’t gonna... I swear I wasn’t—”

“Nate!”

Elle pushes my shoulder but I've got a grip on the wheel on her side and she can't budge me. I'm still bristling from the adrenalin. She doesn't get it. She just looks at Tarik and gasps. She doesn't see things before they happen, the way I can.

"Look at your face," I tell Tarik. "Turn around and look at your face."

He slowly gets up from the floor, backing away from us. Turns around to look into the mirror hanging in the hallway by my bedroom door. He sees, and immediately jumps back with a strangled, exasperated, agonized sound I'm positive I'll never forget the rest of my life. It's like he's on fire on the inside. It shows right through his skin, a dull orange glow. Smoke is coming up off his clothes. He gasps. Stumbles backwards.

"Keon you need to calm down," Elle says. "Listen to me. Just like at Twigs."

I have no idea what Elle is talking about. Tarik isn't even here anymore—he might be physically, but his face is blank like everything that makes him a person just got up and walked out. I don't know whether it's the drugs or the super thing, or a combination of both. What I do know is he's not in control, because the longer he stands there, the brighter the thing inside him gets. He's radiating so much heat the whole room's getting warmer. Elle tries to step around me and I push forward a bit to stop her.

"Nate get out of the way."

"Elle he's—"

"Get out of the way."

"No," Tarik mutters. Then louder: "*No.*"

He edges towards the back door. Elle reaches for him.

"Keon!"

He bolts. She tries to take off after him but I catch her around the middle and hold on tight. I see Tarik snatch the key hanging on its hook from a skate lace just before the door slams shut.

“*Nate!*” Elle screams. “Nate, let me go, let me fucking *go!*”

“Elle, *Elle.*” I lean away as she struggles. “Elle listen to me, he’s better off where he’s going—*Elle!* He’s going to the Baron!”

She phases out of my grip and charges towards the door. Stops. Her hands clench and unclench at her sides. She shakes her head slowly back and forth.

“*How do you know?*” she demands, her voice so shrill it echoes off the walls.

I point to the empty hook by the fridge.

“He took my key to the player door.”

“Aren’t there people there? What about the staff? We’ve gotta get there before he does, let’s *go.*”

“Elle.”

She whirls around on me and the look on her face is livid. I’ve never seen her this way before.

“No!” she seethes. “You’re not in charge here, you don’t *always* know what’s best for everyone else, and you can’t tell me what to do! If Keon hurts somebody he will never forgive himself and you just fucking threw him across the kitchen like a piece of—weren’t you *listening to what he just told you?*”

“Of course I was!”

“Then *what the hell, Nate!*”

“I was trying to keep him from hurting *you!*”

The volume of my voice makes her jump and step back. She glares at me like I'd electrocuted her. I'm inching towards panic and this happens to me so rarely that I don't know what to do when it does. It's like those dreams where you fight and fight but you can't get to the other end of the rink and then the ice melts and all of a sudden everything's just buried under water and it's so cold you can't think. Can't move. I haven't had that dream in so long. Elle doesn't know about that—nobody knows about that. I buried that back with the first and last unused bottle of Zoloft because *performance anxiety* wasn't a good enough excuse. Jesus Christ a nine-year-old trapped in a burning house. I get a violent jolt in the pit of my stomach and Elle's degree of pissed is the only thing keeping me from doubling over and getting sick right there. I zone out and back before Elle takes her next breath.

"He *can't*," she snaps. "He can't hurt me—nothing can. I'll just phase out. I'll just—"

"But he doesn't know that, I—"

"I'm not stupid, and neither is he, so what the hell makes you think you have the right to make these kinds of decisions for people?"

"I'm—for fuck's sake. I'm—Elle, do you think it's—I'm not. I just—"

"You *what*?"

"I am *trying!*"

I slam both fists down on my arm rests and the mail scattered all over the floor flutters into the air again like a gust of wind just blew through the house. The blinds on the front windows billow out and crash against their frames. Nothing makes sense. Nothing. We live in a world where there doesn't have to be a reason for awful things to happen.

"I'm sorry I pushed him. He was freaked out and you were right there and I just picked a direction and went, Elle. I fucked up. I'm sorry."

Elle stands there with her arms crossed, but her expression is softer. I lean forward into my hands and sigh. I'm not used to using my super thing this many times, so close together. It's making me dizzy.

"I don't want him to get hurt either," I tell her. "But if *you* get hurt..."

"You can't protect us both from something we barely understand, Nate. Not by yourself."

"I know."

"But you're trying to."

"It's the only thing I know how to do."

"That's not true."

Elle leans down to put her hand on my shoulder.

"Head up," she says.

I look at her. I've never been on the receiving end of my own stupidity before. It's a difficult level to be on. Especially when you're wrong, and the person holding you together's the only one who seems to know what the hell she's saying. She smiles at me, but I can see her eyes are still filled with worry.

"We've gotta make sure Keon's ok now. After that, we can figure out everything else. All of us, on the same level."

"He's there by now."

She straightens and looks over at the back door, chewing on her lip.

"What if—"

"The building's insulated. Two hundred feet of ice and a solid concrete slab underneath. Everything else's metal and brick. As long as we can keep anyone from going inside, he'll be safe."

“But he *did* make it there.”

I shake my head. I don't know. I really don't know.

| *Elle.*

This thing that happened to us four years ago? It redefined things for us. What reality is. What we once believed wasn't possible. What it means to lose something that can't be replaced. And it redefined each of us, too. I think that's the part that's hardest to explain.

The Baron's windows are brilliant orange from the sun when we get there. Nate takes the car around to the back lot to check if there's anyone else to worry about. I go to the public entrance and tug on the door out of habit. The deadbolt clunks against the frame. I put my hand on the wooden panel of the door, take a breath, and push right through. It feels like a whisper of a breeze, so light you can barely tell there'd been any movement at all. When I woke up, no clue who I was or how I'd gotten here, there's a reason I was convinced I was some kind of ghost. It took Nate the better part of a year to convince me otherwise.

I wonder how long it'll be before Keon can sleep through a night the same way I can look in a mirror and not wonder whether I'm even real.

When I pop out on the other side of the door, the entrance is dark and it's much colder than usual. My breath clouds around me. I shiver. It doesn't smell like it usually does in here—like zamboni wash and floor wax. The counter for skate rentals is shut tight behind its metal gate. The larger-than-life images of the current Phoenix players stare blankly out from the walls. Ticket booth's dark too. Not even the vending machines next to the visitor locker rooms are lit

up. The rows of stick tape, mouth guards and skate laces sit inside the glass like they hadn't been touched in years. I never expected this place to feel so...ancient.

I move forward slowly while trying to decide what's different about the smell in here and shudder at how my steps echo off the concrete underside of the bleachers.

"...Keon?" I call out. No answer but my own voice bouncing back at me.

The orange-tinted light coming through the gap ahead, to the ice, seems so harsh. I tell myself it's alright. The Baron lights up in the morning on its own. There's nothing about this place that's actually a *sea of fire*. It's just something someone made up a long time ago. It seems so silly now. I tell myself that's all it is. Just a silly name, and a silly superstition.

The closer I get to the opening between the two sections of stands, the colder it gets. My teeth are chattering by the time I finally get there. When I grab the stair rail to go up to the ice, my fingers are red against the aluminum. And the aluminum is *frosted over*. I pull my hand immediately away. My fingers had left marks on the foggy metal.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I don't let it ring more than once.

"Nate," I whisper into the receiver. "Nate something's wrong."

"Yeah, nobody's *here*," he replies. "Parking lot's deserted."

I recoil from a gust of wind out of nowhere, and from the *snowflakes* that come down with it.

"Uh. I think it's weirder in here. Hurry up."

"I'm coming up to the player door right now, it's still—Jesus, it's *freezing in here*."

I get to ice-level and can barely wrap my head around what I see.

"Oh my God, Nate."

"There's a foot of *snow* in the tunnel."

“Nate.”

“I can’t get through in my chair. I’ll have to—”

The line goes dead. I look down at the phone and watch as the “no battery” icon flashes once before going out completely. I let out my breath and it fogs over the screen. Look back up.

“...Keon.”

He’s sitting in the middle of the rink, enclosed within a jagged ring of ice six feet high and at least a foot thick. I can just make out the dark shape of his jacket behind the rippled, glass-like surface. The lights above the rink are dead too. The exit signs above the gaps between the seating sections. Somehow he’d knocked out the power to the building, and turned the entire rink into an ocean of frozen waves rippling out from center ice like something from an alien planet. The phoenix logo spread under all that, and the two-hundred-foot-long shafts of orange light spearing down from the east windows. I’ve never seen anything so terrifyingly beautiful in my life.

I phase through the boards and almost wipe out on the uneven surface of the ice right off the bat. I can’t tell if Keon’s moving inside the...thing he’s—what to even call it? It looks like a giant splash, like when you drop a coin into a fountain, and that little wall of water comes up with the ripples radiating out from it. Well I step over a “ripple” that reaches up almost to my knees. I hear Nate calling out from the tunnel opposite the one I’d just used. I can see him just on the other side of the rink, pulled up inside the bench and looking out at the state of the place like someone had drawn a Sharpie mustache on the Mona Lisa.

“I can’t go out on that!” he exclaims.

“I’m gonna try and get him out,” I reply. “Go see if you can get the power back on.”

I raise my hand to shut him up before he can protest. I can see him fidgeting in his chair from here.

“I’ve got this,” I tell him. “It’s alright. Go.”

He hesitates for a long while before letting go of the bench door.

“Elle, be careful. Please.”

I flash him a thumb’s up and grin. He doesn’t seem totally convinced, but it’s enough to get him out of the bench and headed back down the tunnel the way he’d come.

I turn towards the ice cocoon and wonder how the hell we’re gonna fix this mess before somebody comes back. There’s very little by way of explanation for this. It’s either aliens, or super humans, and I’m counting on only one of those things suddenly being real in my lifetime.

“Man, Keon,” I yell out towards the ice wall. “Talk about a new trick, huh? Compared to this, ghosty stuff’s looking pretty weak.”

I’m not even sure he’s conscious. He’s not moving. I tell myself he can hear me. I tell myself he’s ok.

“Seriously. Like, you could literally fix the ice caps single-handedly if you want. Think of all the polar bears! They’d be *so* psyched.”

I slip and tumble against one of the larger ripples and sort of slide back and forth in a pocket of ice until I finally manage to get myself upright again. I hook both arms over the top of the ripple and laugh.

“Or we could invent some kinda extreme obstacle course hockey. And here I thought it couldn’t get any more violent. Would that even work, like physically?”

I finally make it to the center face-off circle and I’m so cold my hands and feet are aching. I look up at the wall of ice, leaning up against it for balance.

“Keon, I don’t know how you did this,” I mutter, “but you’d better be ok. You promised me you would be.”

I pound my fist against the wall and it barely makes a noise. It’s like hitting a block of cement. My hand comes away half-numb and stinging. There’s no way anybody could reach him through all this. Is that what this is? Some kind of defense mechanism? I should probably go in from the top. I’m afraid of startling him if he’s...worked up. The top edge of the wall is a few feet above my head. See, this is where flying comes in handy. Right? Helpful. Everything is fine. He’s still alive. Everything’s *fine*.

I take a few shuddering breaths to calm my pulse and focus on making myself lighter. Nate thinks my super thing works because I can control the density of my body. Like passing through the empty spaces between the bits that make up “stuff.” I don’t know. To me it just feels like I can float on air the same way people can float in the water. I just take a deep breath, and suddenly I’m lighter. My feet leave the ice. I rise to the top of the wall, brace against it on my hands and knees, and peer over the edge.

Keon’s lying on his side on an ice-less circle of floor, and I can’t tell from this high up whether he’s breathing or not. His jacket’s almost completely destroyed—the leather pale and peeling in spots, completely singed away in others. He’d obviously overheated, but then what...gone the other way and cooled down...a *lot*?

“...Keon?”

He doesn’t move, and stays that way even after I touch down on the floor next to him. It’s even colder inside the wall of ice than outside. As I get nearer to him, I enter a balloon of frigid air like opening the freezer door, only I’m pretty sure this is cold enough to do some pretty

significant damage if I wasn't still doing my ghost thing. I can't touch him like this, though. If he doesn't wake up I don't know how I'm gonna get him out of here.

I call his name again, kneeling next to his head.

"Please," I mutter.

His shoulders are moving—slightly. It's faint but oh my God he's breathing. He's just asleep. *Asleep.*

"Keon!"

He stirs, mumbling drunkenly, and the relief hits me like a damn truck. My limbs are prickling. I feel like my head's gonna jump off my neck and roll away.

"Keon you—you!" I gasp. "I'm gonna, oh, when I get my hands on you—*wake up!*"

He curls inward, covering his eyes immediately with his hands.

"...Oooowww...."

"Ow!"

"...so...*loud*, Pixie..."

"I'm gonna kill you."

"Mm-k."

"Get up and look what you did!"

He flops onto his back with a groan.

"Oh God. What."

"Keon," I mutter, half laughing, half choking on my own relief. "Keon just *look.*"

He opens his eyes. He takes a sharp breath in. Looks to the sides. Balls his fists to either side of his head and just kind of gapes.

"The fuck."

“That’s what I wanna know. You flipping *broke* the Baron.”

He shoots upright more quickly than I was expecting, his head whipping around. He looks down at himself, like he’s counting to make sure he’s still got all his parts. Stares at his hands, then up at the ice. Stagger back, leans up against the other side of the ring with his hand over his mouth.

“Jesus...*fuck*. What.”

“Your eyes are blue.”

“*What?*”

“Your eyes,” I repeat, pointing up at him. “They’re not red. They’re blue. I’d take a picture but I think whatever you did killed my phone, and every other electrical device in the building.”

Keon gapes at me blankly, his mouth hanging slightly open. His eyes *are* blue. A very bright, still obviously unnatural cobalt blue, and I’m finding it amusing that on top of everything else his super thing comes with a color-coded indicator.

“You’re a walking popsicle,” I tell him, laughing despite myself. Stop laughing. He’s still looking at me like he doesn’t quite know where he is. I wonder if he remembers what happened back at the house. What he’d told Nate, and what I’d overheard.

“...How are you feeling?” I ask him.

He touches the wall curiously, running his fingers across the surface. He tilts his head in my direction. Wonder passes over his face. Then the buffering wheel.

“I...don’t know,” he says finally. “I just. I feel...rested? God. I haven’t slept like *that* since...” He trails off, his expression slowly sobering as he realizes. He looks down at me and he just looks...defeated. “You *heard*.”

“I...was eavesdropping,” I admit, looking down. “I’m sorry Keon. I just heard you sounded upset and I got worried, and I just.” I close my eyes and sigh. “I did what I thought was best at the time.” I can’t help it. My throat tightens up and I can’t stop myself. I try not to let him see but it’s difficult. He’s watching me like I’m under a microscope. The tears come faster than I can wipe them away. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“That,” he mutters, sinking back against the wall. He points at my face. “That’s all I wanted to avoid.”

“...What?”

He sighs exhaustedly.

“Kyle’s pity,” he says, “and you doing what you’re doing right now, because of me.”

I shake my head no. He smiles, looks down at his hands lying open in his lap. A plume of frost materializes in the air just a few feet above us, tracing its way down and spinning like a top, like a string winding up into a glittering white kernel in his palm, expanding as it goes. He’s left with a perfectly clear orb of ice about the size of a baseball with what looks like a diamond trapped in the middle. He holds it up to the light, making a face like he can’t quite believe this is it. The punch line.

“Now I can bring the freezer with me I guess,” he mutters, tossing the ball to me. “I’ll save the diner a lot of money in thawed out bacon.”

I catch it, flinching, expecting to feel cold. But it’s not. Well I mean, it *is*. It’s freezing in here. But the ball feels like it’s made of glass, not ice. Its surface is cold because the air is cold. It doesn’t melt in my hands. Instead, as I look at it, the clear inside of it blooms with a crystalline lattice connected to the diamond-thing in the middle like a 3D snowflake stuck inside a Christmas ornament. I wonder if he knows what I’m holding in my hands right now is

impossible. I wonder if he understands nothing like this has ever happened under this roof and nobody can ever know.

“We’ve...got a lot to talk about,” I tell him, reluctant to look up from the orb. “All three of us.”

He nods slowly.

“Yeah. You’re probably right.”

“But you’ve gotta fix the rink first.”

He laughs. Falters. Looks around him and laughs again. It’s this halting, restrained laugh like he’s not sure whether he’s allowed to or not. He presses a hand to his mouth and his shoulders bounce up and down, and all at once the wall of ice surrounding us begins to evaporate into dense columns of vapor, climb towards the rafters, and disappear. I notice the next time he looks up at me, still laughing, that his eyes fade from that bright blue, to a muddy violet, and then back to red. It’s a relief in a way. Normal to me. Takes the edge off of the blaring question of what this will all mean for tomorrow. But then again, tomorrow is tomorrow, and right now is right now. The lights in the ceiling come back on with a sudden explosion of noise that makes me jump, which keeps Keon going for another minute and a half at least.

When we’re finally able to walk back across the rink again, Nate’s waiting by the tunnel with an exasperated look on his face.

“Power came back on as soon as the ice started melting,” he tells us. “I kind of have an idea but...”

Keon stops at the boards, hands in his pockets, nudging the kick plate with his foot. Nate trails off. They’re both looking down and off to the side. I stand there holding the snowflake ball

thing and hoping for the love of God somebody says *something* because I can't be the only emotionally capable superhuman on this team. I don't even know who I *am*.

After a while, Nate's strangled expression gets to be too much and he caves.

"Look, Tarik, I—"

"It's ok," Keon interrupts, lifting his hand in surrender. "I deserved to get put on my ass, and probably a lot more than that. I'm throwing out everything remotely pharmaceutical I've got as soon as I get back."

Nate stays level. He's always cut right through the fluff Keon puts out to distract from what's really going on. The white lies.

"Tarik I wanna know if you're gonna be alright."

Keon smiles, having lost his game, and he knows it. Thing is, he looks glad.

"Yeah," he says.

They look at each other, and then they look away, and I get the feeling something's been settled but have no idea what or how it could've been that easy.

"Woah wait... That's it?"

They both look at me like I've just sprouted a second head. No. *No no no*, that's *not* how this *works*.

"Are you serious right now?" I snap. "But are you actually serious!"

Nate smiles at me the way you smile at a hysterical crazy person.

"Spaz—"

"Um, *no*, you were just all Captain Overprotective five minutes ago," I wave my hand at Nate, then turn on Keon. "And I just climbed through fucking Elsa's ice palace to get *your* ass

out before it all just *poof*. Gone. And now everything is *fine*? Am I the only one wondering why the hell we're not being arrested and shipped off to Area 51 for *testing right now*?"

"Pixie calm down, haha."

"I will not be calmed!"

On cue, the power cuts all the way back on, I guess, and a shrill alarm resounds under the domed roof, bouncing off everything metal and concrete and rising to a deafening volume I'm positive is just plain overkill. But I spoke too soon—the fire sprinklers in the tunnel rush on and drench all three of us in freezing cold water reeking of rust, Zamboni wash, and old building.

Nate lets out a stream of language I can't make out over the noise. Keon guffaws. We all bolt for the door before the fire department shows up because the getting arrested thing's starting to feel very real and the thought of my first criminal offense going down in a de-iced hockey rink with the fire alarm going off is so absurd that I don't know what to do with myself except run. Clothes and shoes soaked, our feet splashing through puddling water, the wheels of Nate's chair leaving wakes behind us, and me, not quite believing that this is how I will remember the Baron now. These two. Our imperfect lives fueled by mistakes and stupid ideas. My own belonging. My own unsharable story.

PERIOD 1 - 00:00

The End.