

How Can I Help You?

BY

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## Abstract

This nonfiction story is set in a small town just outside of Austin, Texas: as a twenty-something academic, yet naïve, preacher's daughter with a new boyfriend, Nate, I slowly find my relationship turning into a constant source of abuse from my once charming partner, who I later discover suffers from bi-polar, paranoid schizophrenia and is Central Texas's meth kingpin. Although Nate was always the abuser in the relationship, he didn't always see me as the drug-free, outspoken college girl that he originally met me as—he sometimes saw me as the undercover Drug Enforcement Agency spy or the plant from the F.B.I. or the woman sent to him by his father who had been dead for more than seven years. In this memoir, I detail my account in a sometimes humorous and sometimes gut-wrenching way as I explain the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse I endured for months, yet still managed to break free of.

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## One

You were brought up to help people. That's just what your family did. The lessons that your parents taught you came from interpretations of the Bible. Stories of the Good Samaritan emphasized that "love thy neighbor" thing and made you want to be a good person. When someone was in need, you wanted to help. You wanted to give—to help so much that it became your own undoing. There would be nothing left of you to give anymore.

Your parents were good people. You were a good person.

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"Mi-ja," my Papi said, his mustache prickling my ear, drawing out the syllables. "Time to get up!"

I grumbled something inaudible and he continued his sing-song routine, always directly into my ear. His tie dangled in my face when he pulled back to see if he had woken the sleeping dragon. I wanted to yank his tie to teach him a lesson, but I knew the only lesson that could come out of that scenario would be a firm spanking across my nine-year-old rear end. Even then, I didn't want to ever upset Papi. I respected him as a great father and preacher. Watching him preach in front of so many people made me feel so proud. I knew other people respected him as the preacher, but the fact that he was *my* father made his role in my life infinitely more special. Even though I was so annoyed by his high-pitched "Miii-ja!" that caused my eardrum to buzz every time, I secretly loved the ritual of Papi waking me up on Sunday mornings.

I rolled over or tried to cover my ears with my blanket, but he always found a way back in. Eventually, I threw the covers back in a fit and stormed out to the kitchen where everyone

was already dressed and eating breakfast, slowly lifting spoons full of Kix cereal to their mouths, careful not to spill on their Sunday best.

“Here are your options,” my mom said. “You can eat breakfast and go to church in your pajamas or you can go get dressed and eat a banana in the car.”

I threw myself into a chair at the table, crossed my arms and refused to look at her or anyone else at the table. I loved attending church, but I didn’t love waking up early for it or anything else, for that matter. I couldn’t understand why God wouldn’t be happy with us starting church during late morning or midafternoon, just around lunchtime. Didn’t he like breaking bread with his followers? Why couldn’t we sit around a banquet table in the church annex and eat and listen to my Papi preach? I was much happier after waking up on my own accord and having a decent meal, so naturally this seemed like the best option.

“Let me rephrase that,” she said. “Get dressed.”

I went limp, sliding off the chair until my body was crumpled mass on the floor. My sisters audibly sighed, which no doubt was accompanied by an eye-roll. I waited for my mother to say something so I could scream, but she ignored my tantrum and I eventually gathered enough strength in my legs and arms to push myself up off the floor and drag my unwilling feet to my bedroom to pull on a puffy-sleeved dress my mother handmade for me. By the time I was done pulling on my tights, I could hear my family scooting out the front door. I buckled my lavender faux leather Mary Jane and ran down the hallway. My thick brunette mane was still untouched by a brush or anything to calm my unruly bedhead. But at least my dress was on.

Most Sunday mornings were spent like this: my family standing around the living room, waiting to head out the door, all shouting down the hallway at me to hurry up or they were leaving, despite this not really being an option. My younger sister, Erin, who I also shared a bedroom with, would run back to the room and eagerly help me dig through the closet to find a missing shoe or give me advice on which headband to wear. My older sister, Adrianne, would stand out in the living room and try to talk my parents into just leaving me behind. They never did. On those days, not only was I unhappy with my hair, but I didn't like the dress I was wearing or the tights I had chosen. On those days, I left the house in tears.

But arriving at church made me forget the atrocity on my head or the run in my cream-colored tights. When I spotted the Iglesia de Cristo sign as we turned off a busy road near downtown San Jose, I was overwhelmed with excitement at seeing my church friends—a group of families with children my age that I had seen at least three times a week for as long as I could remember. All the adults were addressed as *Hermano* or *Hermana*, our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Despite not understanding much of what my Mexican father preached, who coincidentally of all people looked like a brown Saddam Hussein pacing back in forth in forth in front of the church, as all of the sermons and hymns were in Spanish—something that my white Midwestern mother never learned, either—I found a sense of calmness in the rhythm of the language. My sisters and I sang along to all the hymns, recognizing their tunes from the English versions we had learned from our mother; “Jesus loves me” became “Cristo me Ama,” and “Blessed Assurance” became “Grata Certeza.”

Going to church three times a week meant that the teachings of the Bible were always fresh on my mind, and even if I had forgotten our family's Sunday afternoon discussions about



the sermon for that day—Papi always translated for us later—my parents made sure to remind us of what values Jesus would want our family to uphold. We were taught the standards: be kind, be loving, be accepting. We also learned to care for the sick and the elderly, a lesson that stuck with me and would haunt me in ways that I didn't foresee at such a young age.

Sometimes when we were on our way to church or when my mom was taking my sisters and me to school in the morning on the rare occasion that we didn't walk there, we saw a tiny, withered old woman shuffling to and from her home just a few blocks from our own house. I never knew where she was going, but she always wore a navy crushed velvet muumuu and greying wool slippers that I suspected were once white. She carried a plastic grocery bag as a purse over her frail shoulder. Wild white hair stuck out at every angle from her head. Her hair reminded me of the time I gave one of my Barbies a haircut too close to her scalp; even when I dunked that Barbie's head underwater, her hair still wouldn't lay flat.

The old woman never had a companion to walk with. As far as I knew, she lived alone in her little house—a white stucco shack hidden behind an overgrowth of weeds and tangled bushes. A rusting car sat on cinderblocks in the driveway, which seemed to be quite an obstacle for the old woman to navigate a path between the car and the chest-high weeds that threatened to close the gap. Sometimes, several days would go by before anyone in my family had seen the woman, which wasn't unusual—she always reemerged, and we would speculate on what she must be doing.

“She probably went to play cards with her biddies,” Erin offered. We learned what a “biddy” was from short Sunday afternoon phone conversations with our grandmother in Texas, who would recount her whole week to each of us before asking to speak to our mom. Her

Sundays usually consisted of church with the biddies followed by brunch at one of the biddies' houses.

"No, she doesn't have friends," I said. We were en route to church, sitting in the backseat of the car. My father looked at me through the rearview mirror.

"Why don't you think she has friends, Mija?" he asked.

"She's always alone! And she probably smells weird because she wears the same clothes every day."

"Maybe we should be her friend," he said. This suggestion made the three of us collapse into a fit of giggling. My mother reached over the center console and patted his leg.

A few more days had passed after my father's suggestion of befriending the old woman and we had forgotten all about the conversation until one Saturday afternoon. My Papi called for my sisters and me to get our shoes on and be ready to leave the house soon.

"Where are we going?" I asked my mom.

"Papi has an idea. Just get ready." She sighed and squeezed my shoulder.

She offered a tight-lipped smile, pushing her already thin lips so close together that they nearly disappeared—if it wasn't for the crinkled corners of her sharp blue eyes, I might've missed the smile completely. Her eyes stood out in between the wisps of her sandy-colored bangs. I loved staring at her eyes and trying to pick out the different flecks of gold and bronze in them, usually while she watched television or worked at her computer. She'd laugh and playfully push me away, usually giving in to playing with my sisters and I. Sometimes she played Candy

Land with us or helped us make beaded bracelets; other times, she sat cross-legged on the living room floor with me in front of her while she braided my thick mane. She always kept her hair in a pixie cut, but I think she secretly missed her long hair from her college years.

Ten minutes later, my Papi was leading the way, pushing a lawnmower down the sidewalk. The rest of us trailed behind him.

“Mom, what are we doing?”

“I don’t know—“ she said. She rolled her eyes, but kept walking. “Going to help that lady, I guess.”

“What lady? The old lady?” Adrienne asked. She stopped walking, prompting the rest of the group to halt.

My mom nodded.

“The lady who lives in the weeds house?” Erin asked.

Again, my mom nodded. She gently gave Adrienne a nudge so as to not trip over her as she tried to keep walking again. Adrienne didn’t move.

“Why?” My question came out as more of a shout. I did not want to spend my afternoon helping a stranger. Even more so, I was worried that one of my classmates—who were well aware of the old woman as the ultimate playground insult was that you looked/smelled/walked like that old woman—would see me at her house. We lived on a very busy road and there was no doubt in my mind that someone who knew me would see me at the old woman’s house and would probably label me her grandchild since she was the only white woman in the

neighborhood besides my own mom and it was well known that my sisters and I were “coconuts”—something other students taunted us with—brown on the outside but white on the inside. In fact, I was lucky that nobody had made that assumption already. I couldn’t take any chances.

“I don’t know. Gil, why don’t you explain to them what we’re doing,” my mom said. She sounded stern, the same way she sounded when we interrupted her on the phone or when she was working in the back room of our house. She held out her hand—thin fingers pressed together to cup her palm—like she was waiting for him to put his explanation in it, then brushed her bangs out of her face.

“We’re just doing some good,” my Papi said. It was almost as if we weren’t there. He was focused on keeping the lawnmower moving at a steady pace while we trailed along behind him. He hadn’t even stopped to tell us what was going on—he just called explanations over his shoulder at us.

“I don’t want to go!”

“Why are we going?”

“Does she even know we’re coming? Did she invite us?”

All of our questions went unanswered. At the end of our walk, we found ourselves buried in the weeds. Papi abruptly started up the lawnmower and went to work on the far side of the yard, away from the broken-down car. My sisters and I hunched down and started pulling weeds up by the roots after Papi mimed the motions for us. My heartbeat quickened partly over the intensive labor of yanking weeds out of earth that wasn’t ready to let go of them yet, but also

over the thought that we might be doing something that we weren't supposed to be doing. I had to admit that the tangled, overgrown weeds clearly provided her with a sense of privacy that we didn't get from the cinderblock barrier that surrounded our own yard. Still, I did as I was told and pulled at weeds that slid through my hands, leaving thin razor cuts in my palms. Maybe she didn't want all that privacy. Maybe she wanted to watch cars go by on the busy street out in front of her house, but couldn't because of the grass and bushes that grew without abandon. Maybe we were doing something nice for her. I smiled to myself and wrestled with another weed.

I'm not sure how long we were pulling or how long my mom was yelling, but after some time, I stood up and looked over the weeds to see my mom shouting and waving her arms at my Papi before she crossed the yard and pushed her finger hard into his shoulder then jerked her thumb in the direction of the house. Adrienne and Erin stood with me and looked to see what my mom was pointing at: the old woman was leaning out of her front window, hanging on desperately to the rotting shutter that also clung with desperation to the window frame. She was gesturing at the lawn with her other hand. Finally, Papi cut the motor and we heard her voice.

"What are you doing?" she shouted. Or it was her version of a shout. Her voice cracked at a volume that was barely louder than what my teacher called an "inside voice." Papi stepped over a growing pile of chopped weeds and walked towards the window a few steps away. He smiled as he stepped over a pile of rocks he'd been building as he came across them scattered in the yard.

"What?" he asked. Her mouth moved, but I couldn't hear anything she said from my spot safely in the middle of the yard. Papi moved closer, still smiling, placing one foot in a mound of dirt just a few feet from where the woman stood in the window.

“Stop! My flowers! You’re killing my flowers.” Papi looked around at the yard and finally stopped at his feet. The smile vanished from his face. There were no flowers in the yard. Save for some dirt, weeds, and grass the color of straw, there was nothing living in the yard nor had there been for as many years as I passed that house on my way to school.

“My name is Gilbert Torres,” he said, reaching his hand out. The old woman shrank back and pulled the shutter closer to her. Papi dropped his hand. “This is my family. We want to help you clean up your yard.”

The old woman shook her head and started to cry. “You’re killing my flowers.”

“Show me where the flowers are. We’ll work around them,” he said.

“You’ve already killed all the pink ones. Bring me the petals.” Again, Papi looked back at the parched yard behind him. My sisters and I looked at each other, then over to the patch of mowed weeds. No flowers anywhere. He bent down and picked at a handful of dirt.

“This?” He held out his hand, but I couldn’t see if he found a petal that I somehow missed.

“My flowers. You’re killing them all. Get out of my flowers!” she turned her gaze on my sisters and I. Almost instantly, my mom was back by our sides, shooing us onto the sidewalk.

A nervous smile spread on his lips as he tried to explain that we could plant her some flowers if she wanted—he just wanted to cut the grass. She had snapped the window shut already, leaving my Papi to search the yard for imaginary flowers. His shoulders rolled forward and his head dropped as he walked back to the mower.

“Let’s just go, Gil,” my mom called. She looked down at us and pushed us past the rusty car. “C’mon.”

Halfway down the block, Adrienne finally broke our silence. “She was so weird.”

“She wasn’t—“ my mom started. “She was sick.”

“She didn’t look sick,” I said.

“Well, sometimes people are sick in a different way than having a cold or a sore throat. Sometimes people can’t help it, but their brains think in a different way than everyone. They might see things that aren’t there.” For the first time since we left the house, Mom’s tone had softened.

“I think she was just weird,” Erin said. We were stopped at an intersection, waiting to cross the street. “I don’t want to help her again.”

“Sometimes when people get older, their brains get sick,” my mom explained. “What if that was your grandma? Wouldn’t you want someone to help her take care of her house?” We were all silent while we tried to imagine our normally heavily primped grandma wearing the same clothes every day and never combing her hair. It didn’t matter if she wasn’t going to leave the house—our grandma always had to “put her lips on,” which meant carefully swiping a tube of Merle Norman’s Plum Rose lipstick over her lips, reapplying it throughout the day even if the color hadn’t faded. She always wore pressed slacks and a button-down shirt, a look that was always complete with a pair of kitten heels and a brooch, and white cotton candy hair that didn’t move an inch whenever the wind blew. Her White Shoulders perfume mixed with the smell of hairspray and Listerine created a scent of her own that I could recognize anywhere. She was

bossy—a firecracker. I didn't want to imagine her ever getting sick or needing someone's help. I couldn't really imagine it, honestly, but I wondered what would happen if her strength ever disappeared and she needed assistance. Wouldn't I want someone to help her then?

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As an adult, you think about that time you and your family helped that old lady. You can't believe what a brat you were about it at first—you didn't want to help anyone but yourself. Even at a young age, you were into appearances. What would your friends think if they saw you helping the bruja? We'll, you'd be the bruja's hija and you couldn't have that. You think about how you scoffed at the old lady yelling at your Papi and scaring you away. You were just trying to help.

Now you think about your grandma and how much pride she takes in her own flowers and her own garden. You know she'd be upset if someone did anything to destroy what she worked so hard for. But what if the flowers weren't real? You hope that her mind never gives into that—to thinking that something that's there really isn't there at all—but you know it's possible as she gets older. And if it happened that way, you would want someone to be there for her. To hear her. To help her. You want to be there for her—you want to be there for anyone who needs it.

Helping the old lady made you realize that appearances don't matter. You think that sometimes people need help and they don't always know it. Your father thought that helping would be so easy, but sometimes it's more complicated than that. The lesson he gave you left



you with questions that you had to find answers to yourself, like *What happens when you help someone so much that you end up hurting yourself?* You didn't see that coming as you left childhood behind and moved into your adult years. You just knew to help. You didn't know how to protect yourself. You didn't realize that you might be the person needing help one day.

## Two

When I was in seventh grade, I found a letter my mom had written to my dad saying that she was going to leave him when my two sisters and I graduated high school—she'd leave sooner, but she reminded him that she promised us she'd never leave him; once we were older, we could better understand a divorce and if we were away at college, we wouldn't have to live with it day in and day out.

Divorce was never in our vocabulary at home until one of my friends at school told me her parents were getting a divorce. When I told my mom about my friend's parents, she could see the worry on my face—I thought my friend's parents were happy so what would stop my own parents from divorcing unexpectedly?—and explained that God doesn't like divorce. When two people get married, they make a promise to God that they'll be together forever. With my Papi being a preacher, I felt like he was closer to God than anyone on the planet, so if anyone was going to keep a promise to God, it would be him. Her words put the idea out of my mind until I found this letter. She wrote that she was tired of worrying where money would come from in order to pay rent and support the family and that she was tired of “not having help with the kids.” I didn't know what that meant, but it was enough to make me stop reading. I didn't want to know any more about what my sisters and I had done to make my mom want a divorce.

“I'm sorry you found this letter and it made you so upset,” she said. She had found me in a heap on my bedroom floor. She unfolded her hands and put her arm around me, pulling me into her. “I want you to know something. I gave him this letter about a month ago—right before I took you girls up to visit your grandma. And you know what? Things have been better since then.”

I buried my face in her shirt, breathing in her scent of honeysuckle. She ran her hand down my back, trying to calm me.

“But why do you want a divorce?” I cleared my throat. “What was so bad?”

“Well, I just felt that I was always working and having to take you guys to school or to soccer practice and he wasn’t helping with anything.”

It struck me how much my sisters and I might be part of the problem. I thought about quitting soccer and all my extracurricular activities—maybe that would help.

“I thought you liked taking us to practice.”

A slight smile spread across her face and she craned her neck forward, willing me to lift my chin and look her directly in the eye. She wanted to make sure I understood every word of what she was about to say.

“I do, but sometimes I need a break or I need to catch up on my work. It’s not you girls’ fault.”

I didn’t understand. He worked, too, but he didn’t work from home like she did, so of course she was the one to pick us up from school. I thought about how nice my dad was to me and to everyone. The tears started to come again when I thought about how sad he must have been to read that letter. I stared back down at my lap.

“But maybe if we don’t play soccer, we’ll have more money. We won’t be spending it all on soccer tournaments and uniforms.”

She squeezed my shoulder.

“Oh, honey, you don’t have to quit soccer. Our money problems have nothing to do with that. Really, Stef. Things are better. Did you read that part about where I said I promised you girls I’d never leave?”

I nodded.

“And that promise is still true.”

I wanted to ask why that felt conditional—that her own words in the letter told my father that she would leave him once we were out of high school and “old enough to understand”—but I didn’t know what that meant at the time; I only knew how it felt. I couldn’t ask. I didn’t want to hear the answer. She was saying she was thinking about divorce in the same breath that she was saying she wouldn’t ever leave. I really wanted to believe her about not ever leaving my father, but that letter lurked in the dark corners of my mind. I felt like she lied to me when I came to her with my concerns about my friend’s parents a few years earlier, and it was clear that she was thinking about divorce when she promised she would never leave my father, so what was stopping her from lying to me again?

After that, I frequently wondered if I’d come home to the contents of my bedroom being reduced to a suitcase and my mom telling me that we were leaving to go stay with my grandma. As I got older, I wondered when my mom would tell us that we had to choose which parent we wanted to live with. I decided that I would choose to live with my dad—I thought my sisters would choose my mom because they often labeled me as our dad’s “favorite” and I didn’t want him to have to live alone after the divorce.

Divorce was not okay in the church, which meant it was not okay in our extended family, either. I didn’t care what God had to say about my parents’ marriage, but I wanted my immediate family’s business to stay in the immediate family in a way that I knew it couldn’t if my parents were to split up. I didn’t want to think about my grandma exposing my family’s secrets to her biddies during Sunday afternoon brunches. I was only interested in keeping up the appearance of being happy and I worried that if someone outside the family knew that my parents’ marriage

might be failing, that someone might help my mom leave. I was only interested in help if it would benefit me. I didn't know that my own desires of having my parents stay in a miserable marriage might make them unhappy. Instead, I thought about how they could only work it out if they stayed together. It didn't occur to me that maybe they didn't want to work it out. Still, it seemed that the only answer was to stay because that's what she did. I thought that's what anyone in a marriage should do.

I didn't ask any more questions or bring it up again, but I was overjoyed when Papi was the one taking us to soccer practice or dropping us off at school in the morning. I figured that if my dad always carted us around town, she couldn't blame him for not helping out anymore. As far as finances went, I was used to having just rice and beans for dinner, so anything more than that would've been out of the ordinary.

I don't know if things had gotten better in their marriage, but at least outwardly, everything stayed the same for another two years. My parents would have the occasional argument that would send me to my room with my radio cranked as loud as I could take it, and though the arguments became more frequent the older I got, I did my best to pretend that nothing was wrong. It was always the same fight:

Mom: You've overdrawn the account.

Papi: I overdrew the account? How?

Mom: Let's see—here. (Pointing at the computer monitor at their bank statement) This time you went to Starbucks. Or maybe the second time this week. Or how about the third?

Papi: One cup of coffee doesn't overdraw an account. You spend money, too.

Mom: If you get to go out to eat all the time, the girls and I should be able to, too.

Papi: See what I mean?

Mom: But you're secretive about it! You don't tell me anything.

Papi: Are we supposed to check-in with each other for every purchase we make?

Mom: Well if you treat me like the accountant...

The summer after I graduated high school, my mom stopped going to church. I thought she stopped going because the only family car we had at the time was a small two-seater truck after my parents' sedan blew a rod in the engine, rendering it completely useless. I was driving the car when it happened. When I called my parents, my mom answered the phone.

"Mom? I'm okay, but the car broke down. Some guy at this gas station I'm at said the engine is done."

"What?" Her shriek was audible to my friend sitting in the passenger seat with me. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know. That's just what he said. Is Papi there?" She handed the phone off and my dad was immediately asking for directions to where I was. My mom was sobbing in the background. By the time I got home about an hour later, she was still crying and throwing around bills and papers in an attempt to keep busy by angrily cleaning the kitchen table, something she'd done all my life when she was upset.

"Nothing ever goes right for this family. *Nothing.*" She was muttering to herself and slamming books and stacks of Erin's homework down on the floor. "We can never get ahead. I'm so tired of living like this."

The next day, I woke up thinking that my parents would already have left for church, but when I walked out to the living room, my mom was sitting on the couch reading a magazine.

"Where's Papi?" I asked.

"At church."

“Why didn’t you go with him?”

She started flipping through the pages, not looking up at me.

“Because we spend all this time worshipping God and where is God when we need him?

With everything this family goes through, why isn’t God there for us?”

I stayed silent. She was mirroring my sentiments on God, but every once in a while, I would silently apologize to God just in case I was wrong about him.

“Our car breaks down and God isn’t around, so why should I try to find a different way to get to church just so I can worship him some more? Nah. I’m done with that. If your dad wants to keep wasting his time on church, he can go right ahead.”

I was secretly proud of my mom for taking a stand on something that I long ago decided had no part in controlling my life. I didn’t realize it at the time that this would be another point of contention between my parents. While my dad was asking my mom to have faith in God that our family would get through our financial struggles, my mom was asking him to realize that the way out of our financial struggles was to “get a better job and stop spending all our money.” I felt that God was determined to ruin my life whether I believed in him or not.

At the end of that summer, I started going to college in Georgetown, Texas, about a fifteen minute drive away from my parents’ house, but lived on campus. I thought that the school would be everything I loved—with only 1,200 students, it was small enough that I wouldn’t feel lost. I could make friends easily there. It was close enough to my parents’ house that I could visit whenever I wanted to—and I did—and though it was in a small town, downtown Austin was only a forty-five minute drive away.

I had grown to love Austin since we moved to Texas. Even though I was underage and not interested in getting a fake ID, I still went to live music shows with my new college friends.

The black Xs on our hands were hard to scrub off the morning after, but the fun we had at concerts lasted even longer. Austin's hill country also allowed us to take long hikes or swim in freshwater springs and lakes. And when we had enough of being outdoors in the triple-digit heat, we went shopping at funky boutiques and ate cupcakes at bakeries that operated out of airstream trailers. I loved Austin and I didn't want to be away from it as much as I didn't want to be away from my family.

But on weekends when my roommate and my other friends didn't want to go to Austin, there was little to do in our small town. My roommate, Melissa, and I were both becoming increasingly irritated with the fact that our university provided us with no entertainment on weekends, something that would make me laugh when I became a graduate teaching assistant at a university teaching Mark Edmundson's essay, "On the Uses of a Liberal Education."

Melissa and I talked a lot about transferring schools. She wanted to go back to her hometown university, the University of Buffalo, and I wanted to go anywhere where I could learn and be entertained. I didn't want to be away from my family, but I knew that I adapted to change easily and I would eventually get over it. Still, nothing was decided until we went to a frat party having something to do with "tennis pros and hoes." At the party, a mutual acquaintance of ours came over to tell me that the blonde guy from my Ethics class with the football-player physique—thick neck, square jaw, massive biceps—who Melissa aptly nicknamed "Big Guns Derek" was there.

"He's outside," she said. "You should go talk to him."

The girl nudged me towards the open back door. I looked down to make sure my pink polo shirt and white tennis skirt were acceptable for me to be seen in, though I knew my outfit



was far from “hoe” attire when I decided to wear white leggings underneath it. Melissa grabbed my arm before I stepped out.

“Wait!” she said. I turned to face her, where she adjusted the clip in my hair. She handed me her lip gloss, which I smeared on and flashed her a smile.

“Better?” I asked.

“Uh, you’ve got a better tan than anyone here because it’s actually natural and you’ve got green eyes that could kill a man. You’re a Texican hottie.” She started calling me “Texican” shortly after we first met, a combination of me being her “best Texan friend” and the only Mexican American student we knew of on campus.

And with that, we were outside on the back porch of a frat mansion with my crush and a few of his friends. He looked up at us from his spot in a deck chair and asked if we wanted a drink.

“Oh, no thanks,” I said, looking down into my red plastic cup full of Diet Coke. “I’ve already got something.”

“Well, I’m gonna grab a beer for myself then. Melissa?”

She held up her cup for him to see. The rest of the group started talking again and she leaned over to whisper in my ear.

“Go get a drink anyway. Go!”

I felt too out of my element to leave her side, so I shook my head. Just then, the conversation between the few guys left on the porch turned to us.

“So Stef, I hear you like my boy Derek in there.”

Even though I felt like I should be an adult, since I was a sophomore in college at that point, I was immediately back in middle school. My face felt hot. I had no idea who this guy

even was that was talking to me, but I tried to respond as calmly as possible, despite my guts feeling like they were on fire.

“He’s cool, I guess.”

The boys laughed and the one who spoke first started talking again.

“I think he only dates white girls,” he said. “But you act white so I think he’d make an exception.”

At the time, I’m sure I was embarrassed. In a fraction of a second, a huge chunk of my self-esteem was chipped off with just a few words spoken by a random boy whose name I never learned. Everything happened so quickly after his comment. I know that Melissa grabbed my hand and led me out of the house after hurling a few expletives to the boys and we were quickly back in our dorm room across campus.

“Seriously, fuck those guys,” Melissa said, tearing off her own tennis skirt and exchanging it for a pair of yoga pants. “I cannot even believe they’d say something like that.”

“What I would give to be blonde,” I said, laughing.

“If that’s the case, we can go get you some hair dye right now. But fuck those guys. They’re just jealous that you’re my Texican and they can’t have you.”

I succeeded in not allowing myself to cry at that moment, mainly because it wasn’t the first time the “coconut” taunt had emerged since my elementary school days. I thought I should be used to it. After that incident, I wondered how many of my classmates felt the same way about me—that my brown skin wouldn’t be acceptable unless I “acted white,” whatever that meant. The following week, I was applying to schools for transfer.

### Three

Though I got in to every transfer school I applied to, my financial aid was a problem because I had applied so late. I ended up moving back home after my sophomore year until I could wait for the new school year and reapply. Despite my shame at having to move back home, I thought that the longer I lived at home—or either of my sisters lived there—the more opportunity my parents had to salvage their marriage since part of me still believed that she wouldn't actually divorce my Papi as long as my sisters and I were around.

But for the first time in two years, I really saw how much things had changed while I was living in the dorms. Though I felt my parents' love for me, I couldn't handle the tension simmering in the house. What used to be a few arguments every so often became a constant fight about the lack of finances in our house, the number of times someone overdrew the bank account, or how the family was going to afford groceries. The lack of communication between the two of them meant that every few days or so, there was an argument that I couldn't stand to hear. Each argument would make my heart race and speed up my breathing so much you would've guess I just finished jogging a mile—each argument made me wonder if it would be the last one, the deciding argument that made them split. Before my father could even have a seat on the couch after coming home from work, my mother would launch into a new argument with the same theme as all the others.

“Did you get the reimbursement check from the insurance company for my doctor visit yet?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“What! Why haven't you deposited it? We need that money.”

“I needed part of it to get the oil changed on the car.”

“That can wait—we have no money and our rent check is going to bounce.”

“No, it can’t wait. Remember what happened with our last car’s engine? We can’t afford for that to happen again.”

The sedan that broke down years before had been repossessed. My mom claimed that she wouldn’t spend another dime paying for that car if the dealership wasn’t going to help us fix it, even though it was still under warranty. The bills on the car stayed unpaid until there was a knock at the door one night and a man on the other side of it told me he was there to pick up my parents’ car. My mom pushed me aside and handed him the keys.

“Take it!” she said before slamming the front door.

Other days, my mom and I would sit around the TV at home and watch a soccer game together. Watching any sporting event became a spirited event in our family and always brought everyone together. My mom and I provided our own color commentary for games.

“You shut your mouth, Eric Wynalda,” my mom said to the TV. “He’s seriously the worst commentator ever.”

“I know!” I said. “You can tell he’s so jealous of the players now that he’s not on the team anymore. What a tool.”

If my dad made it home during game time, he was quick to change out of his work clothes and join us on the couch. No mention of money or spending or being broke. I started thinking that maybe they noticed I would hide in my room or leave the house when they argued. Maybe they vowed not to argue as long as I was in earshot. My stomach would tense in the moments before either of my parents spoke, but if we were all watching TV together or talking in the living room instead of my mom working at her computer when my dad came home, usually nothing more than friendly conversation came up.

“How are we playing?” he asked.

“Well, we’re playing great, but these refs are determined to make us lose,” my mom said.

“Not a single call has gone our way yet.”

“Of course,” he said. “How was your day, Mija?”

“Oh, another customer yelled at me because there was too much mustard on her hot dog.

Such is life,” I said.

“Ha, people can be crazy. Does Adrienne need to be picked up from work?” he asked.

“And what are we doing for dinner? Can I make something? Should I pick something up for us?”

And this became my life. After a couple of years of working shitty jobs—from cleaning tanning beds and selling lotion at a tanning salon, to waiting tables at a seedy wings restaurant, to managing a Sonic—I eventually got into St. Edward’s University, an academically rigorous and ethnically diverse school nestled on a hilltop in South Austin. I loved that I could still live at home and be with my parents, who were fun to be around when they weren’t arguing, which admittedly wasn’t often, but I could commute to school in downtown Austin. However, maintaining my managing job at Sonic didn’t bring in enough money for me that I could move out.

Because I would spend so much of my time in my car on the drive to-and-from school, in classes, or at the library doing homework, I thought I wouldn’t have to deal with the pressures at home as much when they argued. When I was home, there was either an argument or chilling silence in the house, so I put myself on a time clock. I was going to finish college and go to graduate school. I had to get out and support myself. I wanted my parents to work things out, but I realized that it was something they would have to do on their own. Me deluding myself into thinking that I was the glue forcing them to stay together was becoming toxic for them and me—

I suffered from anxiety that was so crippling at times, I couldn't breathe and my hands and face would go numb. And if they didn't want to be together anymore and I really was keeping them from making themselves happy, I couldn't do that any longer. I wanted my own version of happiness. I wanted my own relationship where I could be happy. I wanted to grow up. I didn't realize that seeking my version of happiness would make me more miserable than I'd ever been.

#### Four

By the fall of 2006, I was enrolled at St. Edward's. Since leaving my former university where I was a science major, I decided that I didn't want to go to medical school—partly because I thought it would cut into my life too much when I was ready to get married (yet another idea that makes me laugh now), and partly because I didn't love it as much as I thought I would—I changed my major. I loved my art classes that I took for my minor, something that I had a natural affinity for, but I didn't feel truly artsy enough to get my degree in it. Besides, I also loved writing and this school offered a degree in English Writing and Rhetoric. I liked to read, but I wasn't interested in English lit classes that forced me to read novels written by old white men. I wanted to be the one writing the novels that everyone wanted to study.

I was excited about my first English composition class, even though it was just a prerequisite for classes I really wanted to take, like Creative Writing or Theories of Rhetoric and Composition. But when I came into class the first day, I was immediately intimidated. The room was full of teenage freshmen, and I, being twenty-two, stuck out like I was an old woman in a room full of infants. In my eagerness to learn, I was always the first person in the classroom and usually the last to leave.

One day, my teacher, Professor Taylor, handed back our essays at the end of class. I had worked for days on that essay, writing and rewriting, and when it finally came time to turn it in, I was still apprehensive about the quality of my writing. I tried to gather my books and shove them into my backpack as quickly as possible before leaving the room to look at the grade on my paper. I didn't want other students or my professor to see the look of horror on my face when I stared down at a D. Everyone in the class had already filed out of the classroom, chatting with

each other about “how shitty [they] did” but following it immediately with “Oh well, I just need a D to pass this class.” In the midst of zipping up my pack to leave the classroom last, Professor Taylor stopped me.

“You didn’t test out of this class?” she asked.

“I’m sorry?” I replied.

“You’re an English major, right? And you didn’t test out of this class?”

“Was that an option or something?”

She laughed as she snapped her brief case shut.

“Yes,” she said. “You could’ve easily tested out of this class. You don’t need it.”

“I don’t?” I was dumbfounded. “I thought it was a prereq.”

“No, I mean you’re too advanced for this class. Yes, you need it as a prereq, but you could’ve taken a writing test to skip this class completely. I worry that you’ll be bored the rest of the semester.”

I was excited that this woman who I respected as my professor and as a writer called me “advanced.” She always wore sleek linen pants and a button-down blouse or dark trousers paired with a jacket—what I considered a grown-up’s wardrobe. She seemed so professional. I also loved that no matter what fancy outfit she wore, she always paired it with a handmade dried macaroni-and-glitter-bead bracelet made by her young son. She had the life I wanted: to be a great mom and a great teacher, among many other roles.

I smiled and flipped to the first last page of my essay where the grade was marked: A.

“I love to write,” I said. “I won’t get bored.”

“Okay,” she said, walking towards the door. Her heels clicked on the tile. “But you’ll probably need to stop by my office hours after rough draft workshops. You might get some good



feedback from your classmates, but it's usually pretty hard to get people to stop playing nice and offer some real criticism. I trust that you'll take my honesty to heart in your revision?"

I nodded and said I'd be happy to stop by her office hours. Even though she said I was too advanced for the class, I still learned a lot from her. Before her class, I didn't completely understand how to formulate a thesis sentence or what the function of a topic sentence might be, but her precise lectures and guidance on my writing allowed my essays to improve more than I knew they could. I read through every comment she wrote on my papers and digested each one, whether it was praise or criticism. I wanted to be the model student. I wanted to impress her. I wanted to absorb everything I could so that I was sure to graduate at the top of my class, improving my odds of getting in to graduate school.

School became my oasis. After two years of not taking classes and working lame jobs, I thrived at my university. I made a couple of friends in my classes, but for the most part, I kept to myself. I was so focused on learning everything I could and improving in the crafts that I loved—art and writing.

Since the commute to school was so long, I spent all day on campus on days that I had classes. When I had long breaks in between classes, I sprawled out under one of the massive oak trees that dotted the campus and read a book or did my homework. My favorite spot on my hilltop campus was under the oldest oak tree on campus that was centuries old. The spot was like any other spot on campus underneath any other oak—lush grass underfoot, squirrels scampering around, pomegranates ripening on nearby bushes—except for the view. At one of the highest spots in Austin, it overlooked downtown. I could see all the way to the tower on the University of Texas's campus and for miles beyond that. At this spot, everything I loved came to meet: my school work, the outdoors, Austin in general. Being on campus made me feel a sense of pride

and accomplishment for myself. I felt like I was back in elementary school when I brought home Dean's List certificates to my parents.

"Mija, that's great!" my dad said. "We're so proud of you."

My mom smiled and nodded while looking at the certificate over his shoulder before putting it on the refrigerator. My parents were always happy with my school success and I strove to keep that happiness going.

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Sometimes, you think about that letter you found back in the seventh grade. You wonder when the day is coming that your mom is going to leave and you know you're supposed to be a grown up and just want your parents to be happy. But you can't think that way. You think that they really would be happy if they just go to marriage counseling or work on their communication or if you could make enough money to help them out or if someone would just hire your dad at a higher wage. But nobody wants to hire a former full-time preacher. You get desperate thinking of how badly you want them to be happy, but you know the answer isn't in separation. When the fights happen, you work yourself into such a state of anxiety that you actually vomit sometimes. You don't know how to calm yourself down when you get to that point.

When you get older though and your parents are happy together again, you sometimes think that you were right. All they had to do was talk to each other and not at each other. But you're sorry. You're so sorry that you didn't see the lesson you were learning from your mother—that you don't leave, that you sacrifice your own happiness—would leave you in a lonely pit of fear and doubt and complete apathy for yourself. You studied your father's ways of

trying to make your mother happy. You saw that he worked excruciating long days to help the family he loves. You learned that you keep giving—you don't stop trying—no matter the cost to yourself.

They didn't know what they were teaching you, but you don't blame them. You didn't know that you were learning the perfect combination of extreme sacrifice.

## Five

You meet a man that you fall in love with so quickly that you didn't see it coming. You think that he makes you happy and loved and important in ways that you haven't felt in past relationships. He makes you forget about the tension at home.

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The first time I met Nate, I arrived at friend's house for game night. A few other people had already come in, but when he walked in the door, my eye was immediately drawn to him. His friends joked that he was "tan for a white boy," but his tan intensified his light green eyes in a way that made it difficult for me to make eye contact with him. I notoriously had a hard time making eye contact with new people I met anyway, particularly men, so I'm sure we both felt immensely uncomfortable when he tried talking to me. I made it difficult for him to carry on a conversation with me because I was worried I'd start giggling like an idiot, tipping him off that he had piqued my interest, so I kept my answers to his questions very short.

I usually kept to myself at school and focused on my work or the lecture which made my social skills suffer even more because I didn't ever try to make friends. To make matters worse that night, I kept stealing brief glances of him when I thought he wasn't looking because a) I thought he was cute, and b) I couldn't get it out of my head that he was a dead ringer for Ethan Hawke. He had the same dusty brown hair and sharp cheekbones, same eyes, same sandpaper facial scruff, same weathered lines framing his mouth, and even the same thin upper lip that forced me to focus on his bottom lip when he spoke. He used his hands when he talked and I could see his chest muscles flex and relax with every motion. Despite my lack of conversation skills, he kept trying to talk to me, which I secretly found thrilling.

"So what do you do?" he asked. "Why haven't I seen you around here before?"

“I go to school. St. Edward’s. ” Again with the short answers. I couldn’t help it. I stared at the crucifix tattoo on his forearm and tried not to look up at his face.

“Cool. What are you studying?”

Part of me wanted him to stop talking to me because I wasn’t used to getting attention from guys and if I did get attention, it usually ended with me embarrassing myself or being embarrassed by something or someone else. I was perfectly content with him thinking I was silent and mysterious, but part of me wanted to pounce and suck on his bottom lip. I figured that my social skills were already terrible, so it probably wouldn’t suit me to make out with him before I even knew his last name. Besides, I could count the number of men I had kissed in my life on one hand—including my middle school boyfriend—and the number of men I’d slept with on one finger. Being sexy, flirty, and outgoing were quite the opposite of my attributes. I decided to just stick to answering his questions and try not to ask any of my own.

“I’m actually minoring in art and working on a degree in English writing and rhetoric.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Um, it’s just a lot of writing,” I explained.

“That’s cool. So you like to write?”

He was scrambling for anything that would keep me talking, but I just nodded.

“I was a computer science major in college. I actually graduated from UT-Arlington,” he said, smiling. He stared at me long enough that I had to look away.

“Oh, nice. Yeah, I just write.” I didn’t know what else to say. I was only good at listening to other people, not talking about myself. I wondered if the conversation would actually become physically painful if I kept up my awkward responses.

“What do you write?”

I took a deep breath, worrying that I might actually die from embarrassment if this conversation continued any further. I had no idea why someone so attractive and so socially superior would want to keep trying to talk to me. I kept my fingers clasped in my lap, stressing over the thought of over-gesturing when I spoke and accidentally knocking over a beer bottle or worse, swatting him in the face.

“So far it’s just been nonfiction. Memoir-type stuff about my life.”

He reached over the table and playfully swatted my knee.

“Loosen up,” he said, smiling.

I had gotten a few text messages while we were talking, but I didn’t want to read them because I was far too interested in the attention I was suddenly getting from Nate. My phone lit up again and I decided to give in and read the message. *You left in a hurry earlier. Please just tell me you’re okay.* It was from my mom. I had several other missed messages from her: *You okay? And I’m sorry I had to tell you about your dad like that. I don’t want you to be upset.* I knew she was sincere—even though we rarely heard the word “love” growing up, I felt it in my parents’ concern for us. Tears started to form as I started texting my mom back: *That’s okay. Everything is fine. Hanging out with friends.* She texted back a smiley face.

“You okay?” Nate asked.

I nodded.

“You sure?”

I nodded again. I looked down at my lap and let my hair fall over my face so I could blink away the tears, hoping he didn’t see them. He was quick to pick up on my “I-don’t-want-to-talk-about-it” cue and returned to our previous conversation we were having. “You should write about me. I’ve had some crazy shit happen to me.”

“I don’t even know you. Y’know, stranger danger and all that,” I said smiling. I was proud of my playful banter. It amazed me that I was able to come back with such a quick and witty response.

“Maybe you should get to know me.” He was smiling back at me and I couldn’t look at him any longer.

“And maybe you should get me some more wine,” I said, passing Nate my glass. I was surprised at how at ease I felt suddenly. Maybe it was his genuine concern at whether I was okay or not when I was texting my mom made me feel comforted. Maybe I decided to try to my best to roll with the conversation and not overthink my every move. Maybe I had too much wine already. He gave my arm a light pinch before he rose to go to the kitchen.

When Nate returned with a full wine glass, he looked down at me and tilted his head towards the back door. *Outside?* he mouthed. I nodded and he held out his hand to help me up from my spot on the couch. When we stood, I noticed he was slightly taller than me, but not enough that I couldn’t look him right in the eye. I appreciated his gesture in helping me off the couch and thought of him as a gentleman, but I was also scared about going outside to be alone with him where I would be forced to carry my own weight in the conversation. Inside, I thought that I could bring other people into our conversation if I ran out of things to talk about, but out there I was on my own.

Outside, a warm breeze rustled the leaves on the magnolia tree that stood in the corner of the yard. I sat back in the hammock on the edge of the porch and propped my feet up. Nate pulled a chair over next to me and entwined his fingers in the rope, gently swinging the hammock.

“So, you like kids?” he asked.

I was a little stunned that this was his first question now that we were alone, but I figured he might be confessing that he had a kid of his own, which I didn't mind.

"I love kids," I said, drawing out the "o". "I have a bunch of little cousins that I just can't get enough of. They're so adorable. I dunno, I guess it's easier for me to talk to kids sometimes than it is adults." He smiled and tugged at my hair. Years later, I'd be shocked—and even appalled—at someone being so forward, touching me without my consent. I'm surprised that I allowed it then, considering my limited experience with men, save for one serious relationship before I met Nate. I liked the attention I was getting from Nate and I liked his fearlessness. I was so nervous about being flirtatious with him, but he seemed completely at ease in showing me he was interested.

"Ever been married?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"I have," he said. "Divorced for about ten years now."

I could tell that Nate was older than me by several years, so I wasn't surprised that he was once married. Hell, most of my friends had been married for a few years and they were all my age.

"Does that freak you out?" he asked.

"Not really. Why'd you get a divorce?"

"Damn, Stef! Already asking the heavy questions."

When he said my name, my breath caught in my throat.

We both laughed, then he continued, "We just grew apart. I did some stupid things cuz we got married so young, but she left me for someone else eventually. We got married when I was eighteen. I joined the Army and we stayed married for a few years, then we split up." His



voice was deep and a little raspy, like mine always ended up when I was back in high school and I stayed up too late talking on the phone with my best friend, only his was several octaves lower.

I appreciated his honesty in telling me up front that he was divorced. I thought that his willingness to share something like that maybe meant that sometimes people he tried to date had a problem with it. Many of my own friends had already married and divorced, too, over what I imagined as them just getting married too young. I lumped Nate's failed marriage into the same category.

"Anyway, things ended amicably. We're still friends. She's remarried. We practically grew up together, so she's friends with my sisters still, too. Sometimes she comes out to family stuff, so I'm sure you'll see her eventually."

I raised an eyebrow. He laughed.

"You'll see that once someone dates a person in our family, they never leave. There's all kinds of exes running around with our family." He laughed again, but I know the look on my face showed the shock I felt. I wasn't sure what surprised me more: the fact that it seemed he wanted to date me or the fact that if that happened, I was bound to run into an ex of his.

It didn't occur to me that he was already deciding my future with him and that I should be put-off by his eagerness. I was just focused on the fact that someone was interested in me. This was new territory.

"Don't worry—even the exes have new boyfriends and girlfriends. Our family is just too loveable to leave, man. We have barbecues and parties nearly every weekend. Maybe you can come with me sometime. My sisters would love you."

I didn't know why he thought his family would love me. I hadn't said or done anything that I thought would make me extra lovable and it didn't occur to me that in stating something so random and seemingly unfounded, I was even more flattered than I should have been.

"Well, hopefully I'll get to meet them sometime." I loved the idea of a big family being so close that they want to see each other and have fun together all the time. I had heard from some of our other friends about family barbecues Nate's clan routinely threw together on the weekend. I kept imagining Nate's tight knit family and fell silent until he broke in.

"I could never do that to someone," he said.

"Huh? Do what?"

"Cheat. I've been cheated on a lot, actually. That's just—" he sighed and looked away. He pushed his eyebrows together and I couldn't tell if he was angry or if he was about to cry. "That's just the worst thing someone can do. And you're supposed to love that person? That's fucked up." I guessed he had been thinking about a friend's situation that people had been discussing earlier inside. Basically, a couple broke up after one of them cheated. I had long forgotten about that conversation, but apparently it stuck with Nate.

"Yeah," I agreed.

"I'd never do that to you."

"Ha! You just met me," I said. "You'd never do that to me because I'd never date you." I laughed as he gave the hammock a shove in response. I was initially surprised at how presumptuous his comment was—he was already hinting at dating me. But just the idea that someone as attractive as he was could be so attracted to me was thrilling enough for me to forget about how forward he was being. It was not at all how I was used to being treated by men and I couldn't get enough of the attention. I felt in control—he was showing all of his cards and I had

something he didn't know about. I was attracted to him, too, but it was easier for me to keep him at arm's length because my fear of not knowing if he was just teasing me and not actually interested in me—just someone to occupy his time for the night—was too overwhelming. But the flirting was fun.

“That's the kind of girl I need—someone that will stand up to me and call me on my bullshit. You're funny.”

“Well, good luck finding her.” I smiled and swung my legs off of the hammock to go back in the house. The control I felt in our flirtation was intoxicating.

“I think I already have,” he said before following me back inside. I didn't want to admit it, but Nate was saying all the right things. Since my breakup with my last serious boyfriend several months prior, I hadn't even spoken to a man. It wasn't that I wanted my old boyfriend back, but I was scared I would get hurt again. I couldn't handle being ignored by someone I loved on top of feeling like an outcast at home for standing up for my father. But Nate seemed so sincere and it had been a long time since I felt like anyone was interested in anything having to do with me. He liked my bold attitude—one that I hadn't realized I adopted since dating my last boyfriend. At some point, I decided that I wouldn't stand for someone ignoring me the way my last boyfriend did when our relationship fell apart. Though I didn't recognize it all the time, I knew I was smart, pretty, and a nice person—I thought I was a catch and it was about time someone else recognized it, too. I proceeded without much caution in getting to know Nate better over the next few weeks.

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When you think back to that day you first met him, you physically shudder. You know that you saw some red flags, but the feeling of getting someone's attention was enough to make

you brush it off. You think back on it and you're disgusted by how easy it was for him to get close to you, but you also know that that's what he was good at—talking anyone into believing he was trustworthy.

## Six

“You’re different from any woman I’ve ever met,” Nate told me once when we were hanging out together at his apartment he shared with his brother Gabriel and Gabriel’s girlfriend. “You’re good. Like really good.”

We had been sitting on opposite couches during our conversation, but after a while, Nate got up and moved closer to where I was sitting. I could feel the skin on my bare arm tingling as he inched closer.

“What? Because I’m not trying to jump your bones and I want to just hang out? How refreshing that must be for you.” I laughed and playfully swatted at his arm. I thought such a gesture might push him back a little bit because I wasn’t sure I could handle the intensity of being so close to him. I was wildly attracted to him—he was handsome and said all the right things. If I had been more experienced with men, I might’ve made the first move, but that thought never crossed my mind.

“No, really. You barely drink, you don’t smoke, and you don’t do any drugs. You’re smart, you’re funny, and you’re not a pushover. Like I’ve had friends who I love to death—even my own sisters, for Christ’s sake—and they date men who treat them like shit. They never stand up to their boyfriends. If I dated someone like that, I can’t say I wouldn’t take advantage of the situation either. People will always do what’s in their own best interest. I need a woman who wouldn’t let me do that.”

He winked at me at the end of his statement, but I was a little surprised by his brazen attitude about taking advantage of people. I wondered if I were in the same situation, if I would walk all over someone to get what I wanted.

“Oh, so you mean that you’re used to getting whatever you want from women and you don’t know how to handle the fact that I won’t sleep with you? Again, how refreshing that must be for you.” He laughed at this and pulled me in for our first kiss. It was slow and gentle—something entirely different from the quick pecks I got from my last boyfriend or any other guy I briefly dated. I was starting to feel safe with Nate—I liked that he didn’t make me guess if he liked me or make me wonder if he wanted to continue seeing me. He was straight-forward with me about everything.

I had confided in Nate about the issues with my parents at home. He said he knew what tension at home was like—he told me his mother had seven children, Nate the oldest, all between four different fathers. Sometimes as many as three different men would be at his house during one week, all temporarily playing the role of daddy for all the kids. The arguments between his mom and her boyfriend-of-the-week usually turned violent, he told me. One of the fathers that stuck around longer than most took a particular disliking to Nate; this guy seemed to care about Nate’s other siblings and, at first, seemed to care about Nate, too. Nate was the only child old enough to play catch with, to rough house with, to teach how to fish, but he was also the only one who was used as a pawn for his mother to get what she wanted. If she was fed up with this live-in boyfriend, she would tell him to get out. If he didn’t comply, she told him he’d never see Nate again. And this continued for years—Nate’s mother would leave her boyfriend, then get back together. Leave. Back together a week later. Leave. Together again a month later—a pattern that continued for nearly a decade. Eventually, the back and forth wore the man down. He started to hate Nate and would beat and torment him mercilessly. This became the only father figure that Nate and his siblings would identify with because he stuck around the longest. When everyone got older, they would take their children and girlfriends and boyfriends to visit their dad on the

weekends, but not Nate. He never went back. After he told me this story, he saw the tears in my eyes. I couldn't stand the thought of any child being tormented like that, but the fact that it happened to Nate—someone who I was starting to deeply care for—made my heart hurt.

"I don't even know what to say," I said. "The tension is nothing like that in my house. It's just hard on me emotionally. It's not like what happened to you." He grabbed my hand and squeezed it.

"No, no—I'm not trying to compare my childhood to what's going on with you now." He kissed the back of my hand. "I'm just saying I know what it's like to feel caught in the middle. I feel for you, Babe. I'm so sorry you're hurting." He wrapped an arm around my shoulders and squeezed. I just stared down at my lap at the tears blurred my vision. I don't know if I was crying for the hell Nate went through or what I was facing at home or the fact that I finally had someone who cared about me and listened to my fears. Maybe I cried for all of it.

One afternoon, I got out of class early. I was surprised to see that he was already off work. Normally he worked until late afternoons or early evening so that was unusual, but on this day, he had me pick him up from a friend's house, where I found him sitting in the garage with the garage door open when I drove up. We hugged as soon as I got out of the car, but he didn't say anything.

"Hey, how was your day?" I asked.

"Oh, fine." He stared out into the street, not breaking his gaze.

"Fine? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It was good," he said, still staring. I didn't say anything, but watched his blank expression, hoping he'd come out the funk he seemed to be in.

“Are you sure? You don’t seem fine.” He cleared his throat and turned to me. His eyes were glazed over, like he was looking at me but couldn’t see me. I started to panic a little—my heart was beating fast and the tips of my fingers were tingly. *This is it, I thought. He’s breaking up with me. It’s over and I don’t even know what happened.*

“Yeah, I’m fine. I just have a headache.” He grabbed my hand and led me towards the door to go inside, glancing back at the street once before we got in the house. I looked back, too, to see what he was looking at, but couldn’t figure out what had his attention. When we got into the living room, he led me to the couch where I sat; he stretched out and laid his head in my lap. I figured he wasn’t lying about the headache—he had no reason to—so I let him sleep.

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When you think back on that moment when you found him just staring like that, you realize that was the beginning of your trip into hell. If only you had known it then. Your instinct was that something was truly wrong—more than just a headache—but because you couldn’t figure it out, you let it slide instead of pushing for answers like you wanted to. If only you had trusted your instinct. Instead you wanted to be helpful, just like your dad taught you.

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I opened up to Nate about everything; he made it so easy. When I had a rough day at school, he was there to tell me how smart I was and how proud he was that I was becoming a writer. When I was upset about my parents fighting, Nate reassured me that everything would work itself out. I liked his confidence in that idea, even though neither one of us had any idea what would happen between my parents. The fact that he could so calmly assert his opinion on the matter seemed like he knew something that I didn’t, but I wanted to believe him. Nate made me feel protected; he made me feel important. He liked taking me out to dinner, going on walks



around the lake, taking aimless drives around the city—he genuinely liked to just be around me as much as I enjoyed being with him. I spent nearly every night with him at his apartment.

One night, we were lying in bed and talking about our day. I was propped up on one elbow, looking down at Nate, when I noticed a particularly gruesome scar across his left forearm. He was gesturing about something he did at work that day when I reached out and touched the knotted skin.

“What happened here?” I pressed the pad of my index finger into the shiny patch of flesh.

“I, uh—I used to be involved in some bad things. And, uh—that’s the result.”

“What do you mean by ‘bad things’? What happened to you?” He tugged on my hair that was cascading down near his face in an attempt to hide his expression. Too late. He winced.

“I didn’t want to tell you this yet, but I guess now’s as good a time as any.” He cleared his throat. “I used to be a dope dealer. A big one. I did it for pretty much all of Central Texas.”

“What’s dope?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “Like weed?” He laughed.

“No, like speed. Meth. Crystal Meth.”

I was shocked. The worst I’d ever see my friends do was smoke pot every once in a while. There was one time that I walked in on a random acquaintance snorting a line of cocaine off a Bible, which we never spoke of again, but nothing like this. The only thing I knew about meth was from the Partnership for a Drug Free America public service announcements: a bunch of ghastly skinny people with rotting teeth scratching the skin off their faces. That was not what Nate looked like. He had a chiseled jaw line, pointed cheekbones, and a piercing stare; not body-builder status, but had some muscle in his arms and chest. He looked healthy. I didn’t know what to say.

“I, uh—had a huge house out in Arlington,” he continued. “A fleet of cars: white paint job with maroon racing stripes down the middle. My favorite was the mustang. I sold a lot of dope to get all that. I even bought my girlfriend a new set of tits—that’s what she said she wanted.” He let out a sharp laugh that was cut short by my stare. It sounded like he was bragging.

“I don’t get it. How long ago was that?” I was still trying to wrap my brain around the idea that this great guy had once been involved in something so disgusting and dangerous.

“Uh—maybe five or six years ago at least? It’s been a while.” He looked up at my face and locked eyes with me. “I hardly ever did the dope myself—mostly sold it—but I’ve been sober ever since.”

That was what I wanted to hear. Every person I knew from high school and around my hometown that got mixed up with drugs would swear they were clean, but then I’d hear that they got fired from a job for failing a drug test or would get arrested trying to drive home so wasted that they could barely see. They always relapsed. I worried that Nate would relapse, too, and I needed to know every single detail about his past as a drug dealer.

“How did you get into it?” I asked.

“My mom. Her last husband who passed away more than a decade ago was doin’ it with all his biker friends. My mom started doin’ it with him.” I thought about what Nate had told me about the abuse he faced as a child. According to him, his mother never stopped it. She didn’t protect her baby. And now I was finding out that she was the reason he started getting involved with the worst drug I could think of?

“I just—I really don’t like your mom right now,” I said. He smiled and patted my leg. I wanted to say “I fucking hate your mom,” but I didn’t. I knew that he loved her and that she

wasn't doing or selling any kind of drug anymore. I had met her at a barbecue once. Her body was so weathered that she could barely stand upright. She had long ago lost all her teeth and wore dentures. Her knotted, mangled hands would reach up and finger comb her waist-length hair, pulling it out in chunks. Some of his family members had a similar frail look, but not Nate. Suddenly it all made sense to me. Because the majority of his family was made up of happy, nice people, it was easy for me to brush off their past. Besides, who was I to judge? My parents raised me to be accepting.

“I know. That's somethin' I'll never forgive her for, but I still love her. It's partly my fault, too. I saw how much fun they were having and how much money they were getting and I wanted in on it. She resisted at first, but she finally let me in.” He went on to tell me more stories about his past dealing drugs. I sat on the bed, horrified by what I was hearing. When I thought about all the people I knew who did drugs, I knew they had one thing in common: they didn't change. But here Nate was telling me how this all happened years ago and he was a changed man. It was easier for me to believe him because I never knew him as an addict or a dealer. To me, he was just Nate—the sweet guy who thought the world of me and never let me forget it.

“So how did you get out of it then?” I asked.

“There were a lot of people who turned to the cops. Snitches. There was another guy who was mad that my business was doing better than his, so he started snitchin' too. But I figured it out and hid a bunch of dope all in his house in case he tried to take me down. One day, we were talking in his house and he said somethin' that pissed me off, so I told him I had his number. Next thing I know, he yells ‘Get this motherfucker!’ and all of his homies are on me.” He rubbed the scar on his arm. “They tied me to a chair and beat the shit outta me for a couple days until I

would tell them where I hid the dope. They did this,” he said, pointing to the scar, “with an electric meat cutting knife.”

“And then what?” I had tears in my eyes, trying not to imagine Nate being tortured for days. I ran my finger over the scar again. I remembered what he told me about how he was abused as a child—I knew that this story of torture was different, but the one thing the stories had in common was the person I cared about was being hurt and that’s what I focused on.

“They finally learned they weren’t gonna get anything, I guess. Dumped me off outside my sister Michaela’s apartment. I was a fuckin’ bloody mess,” he mimed the motion of blood trickling down his face onto his t-shirt. “Never went back after that.”

I stared hard at Nate for a while, wondering if I was missing something. When he started telling me this story, I wanted him to prove to me that he was sober. The whole idea of him ever being involved with meth was scary to me, but he seemed so normal now. I could only assume he was telling me the truth about his past and his present. With all the stories he told me after that about when he was selling drugs, each one sounded increasingly more outrageous, but he told them with such sincerity, I thought they might be crazy enough just to be true. He told me about how he was jumped after leaving an ATM near the airport, a beating so violent that he was comatose for several days and when he came to, he had trouble speaking. He said that when the police started investigating the incident, they showed him what was captured on the camera from the ATM. He pointed to an indented scar on his head and told me that he watched his own skull getting kicked in on that tape, but what made it worse is that he recognized the people who did it as some of his friends he sold dope to. He realized that if his own friends would do that to him for just a little drugs, he had to get out of “the game,” he called it.

“So I finished school and came back to Austin and after way too long, I met the woman of my dreams,” he said before kissing me on the forehead. He stopped talking for a second to cradle my face in his palm, pressing his forehead to mine. “I love spending time with you. I love just being around you. Every day, I can’t wait until you’re out of school so you can be here with me.”

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You won’t believe how easy it was for you to believe his stories. They were so wild, yet so precise, that you believed every word. Now, you pride yourself on being a good listener and a critical thinker. Now, you’re ashamed at how unbelievably naïve you were.

The story of being jumped at the airport? All a lie.

That story behind the scar on his arm? The electric knife? It was really a run-in with a wire clothesline when he was a little boy running around in the yard. His sisters tell you the real stories.

You won’t be that naïve again. You’ll ask questions.

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I loved being with him, too. Every date we went on, every time he cooked me dinner, every family gathering we attended, and every time we just sat at home and watched movies together brought us closer together. When my family met Nate, they fell in love with him, too. He was charming and funny, doing everything to engage each of my family members in conversation. He knew that my mom and sisters and I were sports nuts, so he would come over to watch Longhorn football games with us on weekends. My dad loved deep intellectual conversations, so Nate would talk to him about any scientific or newsworthy article he recently read. He wanted my family to love him and they did.

Once on my little sister's birthday, Nate came with me to the small gathering we had at my parents' house that consisted of my sisters, my parents, and me. She got some karaoke game for her Play Station and was eager to play.

"You're up first, Nate," she joked, handing him the microphone. I thought he would shy away from making a spectacle of himself in front of my family, but he grabbed the microphone from her.

"Only if I can sing an Offspring song," he said, flipping through the song options until he landed on "Pretty Fly for a White Guy."

"Are you serious?" I asked, unable to contain my laugh.

"Yeah I'm serious. Mr. Torres, look away," he said. "You don't want to see this!"

My dad laughed and Nate launched into a spirited rendition of the song, complete with head-banging and jumping around our living room. When he was done, my whole family was in tears from laughing so hard.

"Know any Elton John, Nate?" my mom asked. "He's my favorite."

Nate kept entertaining the family with his hilarious antics with each song. He serenaded my mother and even got my father to sing a song with him. My family was as comfortable with him as I was. I wished that I could be as carefree as Nate was, but my shyness was far too powerful to overcome so easily.

At the end of every day, I would go back to Nate's shared apartment with him. I physically felt safer at my own house, but Nate made me feel protected at his. My family and I didn't live in the best neighborhood, but compared to Nate's apartment complex, our three room duplex was a palace. The drab brown siding of most of the buildings in his complex would fall off unexpectedly and lay in piles on the side of buildings. Tejano music blasted from most open

doors and windows, but where there was no music, there was shouting—sometimes joyous shouts, but all too often, signs of domestic disputes. Nate’s ground-floor apartment meant that we heard arguments outside the front door, through the walls from the neighbors, and from the family living above the apartment on the second floor. Loud arguments kept me up some nights, but Nate’s arm draped across my stomach helped calm me enough to sleep. Groups of kids stood outside on the basketball court (empty of basketball hoops) and threw rocks at passing cars during the day. In the late afternoons, cholos stood around and stared down those same passing cars, daring people to enter the complex—a stark contrast between the otherwise beautiful landscape on one side of the complex that consisted of lush trees, giant boulders, and a thin creek that the complex was named after.

I still was wary of my parents’ arguing and worried that being in that environment would affect my performance at school. Even though I sometimes felt uneasy at Nate’s apartment, I always felt protected. In my own home, I couldn’t protect myself from the arguing in any other way but leaving the house. My anxiety would morph into an animal I couldn’t control anytime I was back at home, even once my father was up in Columbus for work. When I finally got the chance to visit my dad for a few days, Nate called many times during the day just to see how my visit was going or tell me he loved me. At night, I would call him because I wanted him to be the last person I talked to before I fell asleep. I found it comforting. One of the last nights I was in Columbus while I was on the phone with Nate, he asked me what my dad and I had planned for the next day. I told him we planned on going to see a movie and going to lunch.

“I know this is weird, but I can’t seem to shake this feeling that someone else is there with you,” he said.

I cocked my head to the side, unsure of what he was implying. In my confusion, I thought that maybe he thought that I was in some kind of danger, but I couldn't understand why. I needed clarification.

"What do you mean? My dad's here."

"No, I mean—no, nevermind. It's crazy."

I was still confused. I probed further.

"Tell me. What do you mean?"

I genuinely had no idea what he was suggesting, but I always pressed on him how valuable honesty was to me.

"I just mean—and maybe it's because I'm just making weird connections between you and your ex-boyfriend having gone to Columbus together before—but I just can't help but wonder if someone is there with you. Like a boyfriend." He took deep breaths in between every few words, like he felt uncomfortable confessing this to me.

I had taken a trip to Columbus to watch a soccer game a couple years before with my boyfriend. I had no idea that Nate might be insecure about me being somewhere I had been with someone other than him. I rationalized his jealousy by thinking that I hadn't told him the whole story of the time I went to Ohio. For all he knew, I could've gone to Columbus to meet my boyfriend there and he was still living in the city. Still, I didn't like that his questions felt like he didn't trust me.

"What? I'm here with my dad. I don't even know anyone in Columbus." I moved from the living room in my dad's apartment to the bedroom. I worried my dad would hear us have what I thought was our first major fight. I couldn't tell if Nate was accusing me of cheating—my voice started to rise when I talked back to him.



“I know. Like I said, it’s crazy,” his voice got lower. Softer. “I mean, I trust you, Stef, but I guess it’s hard for me to shake the thought of all those times I was cheated on by my exes. I know you’d never cheat on me, but it’s just hard sometimes.”

He sighed into the receiver and I felt bad for him. The only instance of cheating I’d ever experienced in my life was when I was a sophomore in college and I dated a guy for a couple months at most. One day, my sister called me up to tell me she and her friends saw him seemingly on a date with another girl. When I confronted him about it, he stammered for a while and then said “I uh—I just want to be your friend.” It was over as quickly as it started and I was shocked at how easy it was for him to dismiss me. It wasn’t as easy for me to get over, so I understood where Nate was coming from.

“I would never do that to you. You can trust me,” I said.

“I know, and I do. I just thought I should tell you what I was thinking. I just love you so much, I don’t want to lose you, as corny as that sounds.”

I told him I understood. I loved him so much and didn’t want to lose him over something so small, or so I thought at the time. The way I saw it, he confessed his insecurity to me. Why would I punish him for that by breaking up with him? I was insecure about things, too, like not being pretty enough or funny enough or likeable enough. I would feel terrible if he dumped me over those insecurities, so I made it my mission to prove that not every woman was as awful as his ex-girlfriends. I wanted to show him I could be trusted.

## Seven

While my dad was away, I tried to make a better effort of spending time with my mom. I didn't want to be angry at her for the way she interacted with my dad. She had a right to be upset, but I didn't want to feel like I had to choose sides. I let her know that I didn't like hearing her talk about my dad when he wasn't around and that my older sister's comments didn't make it any better, like the day she told me my dad was heading to Columbus for work. She told me that she realized that she was shaping my sister's views of my dad and she didn't want to do that; she said she'd make a more conscious effort to stop, so I started coming over to watch soccer games with her or to just talk. My relationship with my mom was starting to get better and I could feel my anxiety getting back under control.

All my clothes and belongings were still at my parents' house, but I spent more of my time at Nate's. My parents operated under an unspoken "don't ask, don't tell" policy. They knew I was spending all my time with Nate, but they didn't ask questions. I didn't offer any specifics and we lived peacefully with our arrangement.

Even if I had spent all day at my parents' house, I would eventually leave to spend the night with Nate. One time, I spent all day studying on the living room floor while my mom worked at the computer just a few feet away. Books and papers were splayed across the whole living room, where I sat in the middle clicking away on my laptop. When the sun started to go down, my mom took a break from her work to watch some TV. I started gathering my things.

"Oh, is it going to bother you if I watch TV? I can watch in my room," she said.

"No, that's fine. I'm leaving anyway," I told her. I stacked my books and started stuffing the pile into my backpack.

"Oh? Where are you going?"

I winced. I couldn't tell if she wanted me to stay with her to just hang out and watch TV, but I didn't ask. I felt awful, but I cared more about whether or not I'd get to see my boyfriend that night. My mom and I had been in the same room all day.

"To Nate's. I'll be back later."

She didn't say anything and I didn't look at her. We both knew that my version of "later" could mean the next day or later that week. Neither one of us spoke.

Occasionally, I would sleep in my own bed at home, but I found it more difficult for me to fall asleep and stay asleep back at my house. I confessed this to Nate one night, to which he replied that we should just get a place together. I knew that my parents would not approve of their adult daughter living with her boyfriend, and even though I was capable of making my own decisions, that wasn't a bridge I was ready to cross, especially as I was trying to spend more time at home. They knew that I was always with Nate and that I spent nights at his house, but nobody ever said anything to me about it. Maybe it was easier on all of us to ignore it or pretend it wasn't happening. Aside from me omitting where I was going every night when I talked to my parents, Nate had already switched jobs once since I met him and kept talking about how he wanted to leave the job he was in then; I worried that my wages would end up being the sole contributor to rent if we were to get a place together. More and more often, I would come back from campus and he'd already be home. He told me his hours were being cut back because there wasn't a high demand for swimming pools those few weeks, so I'd help him out with his portion of the rent. He didn't have a car, so we shared mine. He didn't have a cell phone either, so we shared mine. I wasn't ready to move in with him anyway, but it was easy to point to finances and hardships we would face if we did end up living together to rule the option out.

To my surprise, Nate didn't protest my excuses. He said he knew I was right, but because I spent every night at his place, he said I was practically living there. One night, Nate said he didn't feel right. He said he just wanted to go to bed and didn't feel like going out or watching any movies. I told him I wasn't ready to go to sleep, so I was going back to my parents' house.

"Why are you going back over there?" he asked. "You told me you can't sleep when you're there anyway."

"I know, but I'm just not ready to go to bed and I know they'll still be up. I can hang out with my family and then I'll be back tomorrow when I get out of class." He sighed and rolled over to face the wall. I couldn't understand what he was upset about. I reached out to rub his back and tell him again that I'd be back tomorrow.

"Remember how I told you that I have a hard time trusting? Well, I can't help but think you're going to go out with your friends or something instead of going to your parents. I want to trust you. I really do," he said.

"Wait, what? Why *can't* I hang out with my friends if that's what I decided to do instead?" My voice started getting louder and my face felt hot. This was a side of Nate that I wasn't used to seeing.

"I mean, you *can* hang out with your friends, of course, but then say so. Don't tell me that you're going to go be with your family and you're not." He still wouldn't turn to face me.

"But what if plans change and I get ahold of Annie and decide to hang out with her for a little while?" He scoffed and sat up to look me in the eye.

"See? That's what I mean. You obviously know you're going to go out."

"No, I don't know that, but what I don't understand is why it's suddenly not allowed by you," I snapped. He sighed again—this time a softer sigh—then reached for my hand.

“Look, I don’t care if you hang out with your friends. That’s fine. I just get worried that you being out with a bunch of girls is going to attract some attention from guys.”

“You should be flattered if I caught a guy’s attention,” I said laughing.

“I am, but it’s just scary to me about what could happen.”

“What, like I’ll cheat on you? Thanks for trusting me.” I let go of his hand. I wasn’t sure if he was serious, but I wanted to hear what his concerns were.

“No, no. I trust you, but I just don’t trust *him*.” His eyes were searching mine, trying to see how trustworthy I was. I knew he wanted to trust me; he had no reason not to. But I also knew how hard it was for me to let go of the idea that Nate or any one of my friends would start to ignore me and just disappear from my life after what happened with my last boyfriend. I wanted to help Nate overcome his fear of trusting women.

“Well *he* can’t do anything I won’t let him do, and I only want to be with you,” I said. “Besides, this is all hypothetical. I’m going to my parents’ house. I’ll even call you when I get there so you can rest easy that you know where I am.”

“How’s that going to work? My brother isn’t here, so you can’t call his phone.”

“I’ll leave you my cell phone and call you from my parents’ house phone. You’ll see when their number shows up that I’m really going where I say I’m going.”

“Okay. And you’ll call me again before you go to bed? I just want to hear your voice before we both go to bed.”

“Okay, but don’t be mad if you’re asleep already when I call,” I said before leaning down to kiss him. He smiled and told me to drive safe. I felt like the good girlfriend who would do anything to make her boyfriend feel secure. I knew what I was doing would win him over and he would see that he was right to trust me.

## Eight

A few days after I decided that I would do everything in my power to show Nate I could be trusted, I came across something completely unexpected. I had left his house early that morning to go to school. His brother, Gabriel, had already left for work by the time I gathered my stuff to leave. Nate walked me out to my car and I realized that the Gabriel's work truck was gone.

"I can't believe he didn't wake you," I said. "Go get ready and I'll drop you off at work." He shook his head and kissed me on the forehead.

"Don't worry—he's been leaving early to go pick up supplies for the past week, then he comes to pick me up after he's got everything and we ride together."

"Are you sure? It won't be a problem for me to drop you off."

"It'll be fine. Have a good day at school," he said, then headed back inside.

After getting all the way to campus, I learned that my class was cancelled that day, so I headed back to my parents' house to get some work done. I knew I'd have to stop by Nate's apartment to pick up my laptop, but that wouldn't be a problem because Gabriel's girlfriend was there and she'd let me in. When I knocked on the door, she smiled and let me in. Imagining I'd be in and out of the apartment quickly, I threw open Nate's bedroom door, only to find him lying in bed watching TV.

"Why aren't you at work?" I asked.

"I didn't feel good. I had a headache," he said, scrambling to turn off the TV and get out of bed.

"You seemed fine when I left this morning."

"Well, it came on all of a sudden. Just like last week."

“You missed work last week too?” I crossed my arms over my chest while Nate tried to greet me with a hug. I was furious at the idea that he had missed a few days of work while I was going to school and holding down my managing position at Sonic and helping him pay his bills.

“Yeah, it’s just these headaches—“

“So you’re missing work because of a fucking *headache*?” I stood, arms still crossed, waiting for my answer, but nothing but silence came. I snatched my laptop off the desk and turned for the bedroom door. I couldn’t believe that he was complaining about something so insignificant while I couldn’t afford to say home from school or work if I was genuinely sick—the workload would set me back for days.

“They’re really bad,” he offered.

“If I got to miss work or classes every time I had a fucking headache, I’d never go to school. Must be nice knowing that you’ve got a sucker for a girlfriend who will pay your goddamn bills so you can stay home with your fucking *headache*.” I reached for the doorknob, but Nate pulled me back. Immediately after the words came out of my mouth, I was surprised at the force with which I said them.

“Okay,” he said. He was frantic. “Please, just sit. We need to talk.” His eyes were red as if he was going to cry. Something in the tone of his voice made me see that he was serious and my anger faded a bit, but just enough to think that whatever explanation he was about to offer me better be good. I sat down on the bed and he cleared his throat.

“I didn’t have a headache. I—uh. I’m sick,” he said. “And not, like, with the flu.” I raised an eyebrow, waiting for more. He continued—

“Like I’m not contagious. I mean, I have something that I take medication for that would really affect me if I didn’t take the medicine. Do you get where I’m going with this?”

“Oh. One of my friends has bipolar disorder,” I offered. I thought that explaining a scenario with my friend would help him realize that I didn’t care what kind of illness he was suffering from—I’d still love him—though something in me thought his illness might be mental. “Before she was put on medication, she told me her life was a nightmare and nobody wanted to be around her, but she’s better now,” I said. I wasn’t really sure where he was going with what he was saying. I figured it was something mental, like depression or anxiety, because he didn’t *look* sick to me. But then again, nobody can look at my mom and know she’s a Type 1 diabetic.

“Well, it’s something like that.” He cleared his throat again. “I do have bipolar disorder that I take medication for.”

“Okay. I’m glad you told me.” I leaned over to hug him. I wanted him to feel reassured that I didn’t care that he had bipolar disorder. I would still be with him. “But I don’t get it—what does that have to do with you not going to work today?”

“I didn’t have my medication.”

“Oh. Do you need money? Should we go pick up your medication?” He put his hand on mine—it was abrupt, as if to stop me midsentence.

“It’s not just that,” he said, taking a deep breath after. “I have paranoid schizophrenia.” I had only heard of people in movies suffering from schizophrenia. Never anyone I knew. I tried to stay calm because I didn’t know much about the illness, besides what I knew from television and movies, which I assumed was likely inaccurate, but my first thought was *You’ve gotta be kidding me. What more is this guy gonna throw at me?* But I could tell he was uncomfortable with telling me his secret, so I kept my thoughts to myself.

“Okay—”



“Remember that day that when you drove up to my friend’s house and I was sitting in the garage? Y’know, I was acting kinda weird, remember?” I had thought of that day a couple times since then because knowing something was wrong but him not telling me had haunted me at times.

“Yeah.”

“Well, with this schizophrenia, I see things that aren’t there.”

I was completely shocked by what he was telling me. Nobody suffered from schizophrenia. Nobody. At least, people that I knew and people that I dated didn’t. I didn’t know much about the illness, but I was trying to take in as much information as Nate would give me.

“Or things happen that mix reality and random shit that happens in my head and I sometimes can’t tell the difference,” he continued.

I wrinkled my brow, unsure of what he meant. I felt like there was something he was keeping from me, but I wasn’t sure if he didn’t want me to know about whatever it was or if he didn’t have the words to explain it. I scanned the room, searching for something to stare at and pretend that I was focusing on something—anything—so that I didn’t have to make eye contact with him, but the room was nearly bare. His queen-sized bed took up most of the space in the room and on the opposite wall was a small tube TV that he hardly ever turned on, resting on top of a filing cabinet. There were no pictures on the walls. No dresser. No desk. I assumed that because he had just moved in, he hadn’t found the time to make his room look livable.

“Like, that day, there was a kid riding around the block on his bike and I swear he had gone around the block twenty times at warp speed in the two minutes we were out in the garage. I couldn’t stop staring at him.”

“Yeah, I wondered—”

“And today, I saw my dad—my birth father—riding shotgun in a truck. He’s been dead for seven years.” He shook his head. “Sometimes I just can’t handle it. So I didn’t go to work.”

“I can’t even imagine,” I said. “So why don’t you take your medication? Do we need to go pick it up? Tell me what I need to do to help you.”

“Because my medication for all my issues takes away the parts of me that I like. And that’s what has made me lose friends and people that I love. They always leave me because of this.”

I could feel my heart breaking when he said that. He had tears in his eyes and I had to look away to keep from completely breaking down when he needed me.

“That day I was acting weird because of the kid riding his bike, I took my medication for the schizophrenia. Lithium and a bunch of other crap you’ve probably never heard of,” he said.

“It makes me so sleepy. I can’t function with it.”

“Well, can’t you talk to the doctor? Is there a lower dose or something different you can do to work it out?”

“That’s the thing. The medicine for the schizophrenia doesn’t mesh well with the medication for the bipolar issues. If I take them both, I’m a complete zombie—I can’t talk, I can barely walk, I can barely lift my head.”

“So what do you do?”

“I take each one when I need it. Or I smoke some pot if it’s around. That’s helps make me normal. I just want to be normal.”

I just rubbed his back while he put his face in his hands and cried. For the first time in a long time, I thought about God. How could God doom someone like this—a genuinely nice, caring, family man—to having two illnesses that, perfectly treatable alone, would incapacitate

someone if they were treated together? Shouldn't God give people a chance? Shouldn't God do something to intervene? Nate didn't deserve this, so I came to a different conclusion and for the first time in my life and was willing to admit: maybe there was no God. I vowed to never abandon Nate the same way the people in his life had been known to do. I vowed to always help him and always be there.

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You blamed his illness for the monster he became. You thought he couldn't help it. It was too hard for you to separate his truths and his reality, but you became too defeated to make the separation from your own reality.

Years later, you'd hear the word "schizophrenia" and think that it was synonymous with monster. You're ashamed of your judgment.

## Nine

Nearly every time I went to my parents' house, I left my phone with Nate so that he could see for himself that I was going where I said I was going. If I went over there to get some work done or to just be with my family, he would call a few times to check on my progress or ask when I would be back at his house because he already missed me, he said. It became second nature for me to leave him my cell phone so that I had a way to get ahold of him, usually to prove where I was. I had nothing to hide, so I didn't see a problem with what I was doing.

During one particular week, I had a major essay deadline approaching, so I went to my parents' house nearly every day to concentrate on my work. On one of those days, I forgot to leave my phone for Nate. I planned to call his brother when I knew he'd be home from work to relay the message to Nate that I'd be back at his house that evening. However, I was intent on finishing my assignment that day, so I also forgot to call Gabriel. Once I realized that I had forgotten to call, I was so close to being done that I decided I'd see him in just a few minutes anyway and I'd explain when I got there. I assumed there would be no problem with my mistake because I had always left my phone with him—this one time would be no big deal. Besides, Nate had told me how great of a girlfriend I was because he could really trust me. I always was where I said I was and that gave him comfort. He said he realized that he was keeping his guard up around me and that he didn't need to anymore. When I pulled into Nate's apartment complex, I saw him standing outside his front door, smoking a cigarette. I pulled into the closest parking spot and jumped out of the car, happy to see him after such a long day of work.

"Hey Babe," I said, crossing the parking lot towards him. He looked up at me, took one last puff of his cigarette, then threw it on the ground and stomped the light out. He turned to the front door and went inside, closing the door behind him. It was a warm day, so I assumed that he

closed the door behind him so as not to let any heat into the house, but when I turned the doorknob, I found that it was locked. I knocked. He opened the door enough to allow no more than the frame of his face through the gap.

“Yes?” he asked.

“What are you doing? Let me in,” I said. He smirked and opened the door wide before walking back to his bedroom. I followed him.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Are you kidding? I haven’t heard from you all day and you’re gonna ask if something’s wrong?” I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was angry, but I didn’t worry because I had an explanation.

“I know, Babe. I’m sorry. I went to my parents’ house to finish my essay and I forgot to leave my phone. I was gonna call Gabriel when I knew he’d be off work to let you know what was going on, but by the time I remembered to do it, I was about to head over here anyway. And here I am.” I leaned over to give him a quick peck on the lips like we always greeted each other with, but he turned away.

“Oh, so even though you’ve been leaving me your cell phone every day for weeks, you suddenly forgot and I’m supposed to believe that you were at your parents’ house on the day you suddenly forgot?”

The scowl on his face scared me. His thick eyebrows hooded his eyes so that I could barely see the green in them. He flexed his jaw. I had never seen this side of him before—not directed at me anyway. I’d heard him have angry, intense conversations with his boss a few times, but he told me that his boss owed him a lot of money and was giving him too many excuses about why he couldn’t pay up. That I understood; this I didn’t.

“I’m sorry,” I pleaded. “I know I always leave it, but it was an honest mistake. You know where I always am. I figured you would know where I was anyway because that’s where I’ve been every day this week when I get out of class. I wasn’t trying to make you worry.”

“I know that’s where you’ve been, so why would you suddenly forget the routine we have? Unless you were going somewhere you didn’t want me to know about.” He stared me down, the scowl on his face intensifying. He raised an eyebrow waiting for my answer.

It hadn’t occurred to me that Nate would think I was doing something I was trying to hide, like seeing another man. The routine of leaving him my phone and calling to check in had become so habitual to me, so I was starting to understand why he might start to worry when something was off. I reached for his hand—he didn’t let me hold it, but he didn’t jerk it away. I saw this as a good sign and let my palm rest on the back of his hand.

“I’m sorry. I really was at my parents’ house. I can show you the work I did on my essay today, if that will help you. My dad made me migas for lunch. My mom was home with me the whole time.” I recounted my whole afternoon. Nate’s shoulders slumped a little and I thought what I was saying was working to help him calm down.

“And I ate a steak served to me directly by Bobby Flay before I hopped in a jet and flew across the country to hang out with David Letterman then came back here so I could meet you when you got out of school.” His voice was completely deadpan. Blank stare.

My stomach lurched and I felt like I was going to vomit. My face started to go numb and my heart was slamming against my rib cage. I didn’t want him to think that I had intentionally hurt him, but what was more important to me at the time was to make sure he wasn’t going to leave me. I didn’t know what it would take for that to happen, but I didn’t want to test him. Everything I said wasn’t sinking in. I couldn’t say anything to make him believe me. I had felt

and experienced so many good things with him that I didn't want it to end, and I thought that he needed me, now that I knew about his illness. I cared more about proving myself as a trustworthy girlfriend than walking away from his accusations.

"Your words mean nothing," he said.

"I don't know what else to say. I'm sorry." Tears started streaming down my face, but his barrage of questions and accusations kept coming, unstaunched.

"I have been going out of my mind all afternoon. I didn't know where you were. I'm still not sure I know where you were. I had one fucking cigarette to calm my nerves that I've been smoking all day. You know how I get when I'm nervous, Stefanie. But you couldn't think to help me out at all—to stop your precious school work to take me to get some cigarettes. Hell, to even give me a call. Do I even matter to you at all?"

"Yes! Of course. I'm so sorry." I didn't know what else to say. I was intent on getting this man that I cared so much for to believe me and to stop worrying. I was concerned that what I had done by not calling had set me back in our relationship—that all the trust that I had earned was gone. I couldn't do anything but apologize.

"And you're not even trying to make it up to me now. Wow. Just wow. I deserve better than this," he said.

"What can I do to make it up to you?" My voice was thick. The tears wouldn't stop coming. I tried to wipe them away, but the tingling in my fingertips wouldn't let my hands function well enough to wipe anything.

"Well, for starters, you could take me to get some goddamn cigarettes."

I didn't hesitate for a second. I grabbed my keys and we were both in the car in under a minute. He usually drove, but he said that he was too worked up to drive. I peeled out of my parking spot, but before I could even put the car in drive, he was back at it.

"I just don't know what to do about this. I put so much into this relationship and this is what I get for it. I always get shit on. I just don't know what to do. Maybe it's time for a break."

I hadn't even cleared the parking lot, but I yanked the emergency break, stopping the car in its tracks. I tumbled out of the car just fast enough that I was on my knees, vomiting onto the asphalt. Nate got out of the car and kneeled next to me. He gently put his hand on my back.

"Oh my god," he said. The look on his face softened and his eyebrows gave away his worry. "What have I done to you?"

We stayed kneeling side by side until my dry heaves stopped. I sat back on my heels and closed my eyes hoping that the warm breeze would calm me. When Nate saw that I was calm enough—though my tears kept falling—he pulled me into a tight hug.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry." I couldn't say anything. I nodded and buried my face in his shoulder, but I was relieved that he wasn't angry with me anymore. He wasn't going to leave me over my mistake and that's what mattered to me.

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This behavior—vomiting or coming very close to it anytime you're scared—is something your body instinctively learned after this day. It's almost as if your body is trying to expel the fear. You keep doing it anytime the fear is too overwhelming. Years later, you'll manage this behavior well enough to keep the vomiting at bay and instead have a nasty stomachache that lasts for up to an hour, but at least you can keep it all in.



You wish that your self-esteem hadn't chipped away so completely that you gave anyone who wanted it a free pass to walk all over you. You can't pinpoint a time that it happened, you just know that it did. You can't believe that you defined your self-worth with whether or not you had a man there that loved you. But you know now that it wasn't really love.

## Ten

Outbursts of anger like the first one I witnessed from Nate became more and more frequent. Nate seemed to still have a hard time trusting me, but I didn't know when his outbursts were over a matter of trust or when he was suffering from an "episode," as I called it, from his schizophrenia. One day, he was driving me to campus so he could borrow my car while I was in school, and he started questioning me about the classes I was taking.

"So, you're getting your degree in English, right?" he asked. I was a little surprised—this was something we had talked about since the first day I met him.

"Yeah, why?"

"So you're not taking any other classes besides English classes?"

"Well, I am—I'm taking an art class for my minor and then I still have a couple general education requirements I have to fulfill, but the majority of my classes are English."

"So if I walked into your English class at any point, you'd be there?"

"What are you talking about? Yes, I'd be there, but if you're doing it just to check up on me, you better forget about it. You know I'm at school." Sometimes, I would push back to Nate's questioning and I'd be able to convince him of the truth, but that was a fine line to walk.

"You're not, like, getting a criminal justice degree or something?" A wave of cold chills washed over me. When I originally enrolled at my university, I wanted to pursue a criminal justice degree, mainly on a count of not knowing what else to do. The day before classes started, I read something aloud to my mom that I had written for my blog. She said writing came so naturally to me—why wasn't I getting an English degree instead? I changed my major that day and enrolled in a couple English classes. I wasn't sure how Nate seemed to know about my

original criminal justice intent, so I told him the whole story. I was worried he'd be mad that I hadn't told him this before, but it didn't seem to matter to me to tell him earlier.

"Interesting," he said, keeping his eyes on the road. I could almost see the thought turning over in his head and I jumped to ease whatever fears he might have before a fight erupted. A small part of me didn't want him to worry about anything—ever—but a much larger part of me wondered if the next fight or argument would be bad enough for him to leave me. The thought of being alone, being away from the person I had grown to love, and having to go back to my parents' house without any escape was enough to make me do anything to keep Nate around.

"What are you thinking? What's the matter?" I asked.

"One of Gabriel's ex-girlfriends started dating him because she wanted to work the narcotics unit in law enforcement and she didn't have experience. Or maybe she wanted to work for the Drug Enforcement Agency. She wanted to see what the underground drug world was like. She never gave a shit about him. It was just a job for her." I could see where he was going with the idea.

"I just thought of the criminal justice thing because I started off as a science major and then I watched too much CSI. I wanted to work as a crime scene investigator, not as a cop. But I didn't even really want to do that. I just felt like I had to pick something. I never even took a class," I said, trying to reassure him. He nodded and his eyes glazed over. He didn't seem concerned or angry anymore—just focused on something I couldn't see.

"You ever notice how sometimes everyone around you is doing the same thing and you can see it out of the corner of your eye, but when you turn to look at it full on, it stops?" He was almost whispering; his eyes shifted from one side of the car to another, like he was checking all the mirrors.

I wasn't sure if he was baiting me into something or if this was completely unrelated to what we were talking about, as I was starting to suspect.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, how you're driving along and you look around and everyone driving in the cars around you is wearing the same goddamn yellow hat?"

I shook my head.

"No, Nate. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Wake the fuck up, Stefanie." Before I could even register what was coming at me, Nate's hand was shoving my face into the frame of the car window with such force that my head ricocheted back and grazed his still outstretched fingertips. Just as suddenly, he was gripping the steering wheel. Tears sprang up in my eyes as I tried to process what just happened. I gingerly rubbed the area just above my temple where a knot was already starting to form.

Nate wasn't shouting, but words were tumbling out of his mouth at a hundred miles an hour and I could barely make out what he was saying. I heard "D.E.A." and a question—that he didn't wait for an answer to—about whether or not I was involved in the game. "Like that day you gave me that purple lighter. You know what purple means."

Nate was always "borrowing" other people's lighters and never returning them. One day when I was at work, a coworker opened a new pack of lighters and tossed out what she deemed as the ugly purple one. I grabbed it to give to Nate so he'd stop taking other people's.

"I don't know what purple means." I was starting to panic—my fingers were tingling and a creeping numbness was spreading over my cheek. I was worried that Nate was too far into whatever dream his mind had created and I wouldn't be able to pull him out. The tip of the Frost Tower emerged from behind an overpass, slowly bringing the rest of the downtown Austin

skyline into view. We were driving down a busy highway, coming up from the lower deck of a split-level road. Six lanes were merging into one stretch of freeway. I was scared of the multitude of disasters that could happen if I couldn't calm him down.

"It means you're about to burn me!" This time he was shouting. He pushed my head against the car frame again. This time I cried out. "Stop it," he said. "It means that you're going to rat me out to the police. And I know that you're having us followed. I saw it a minute ago with all the cars around us and the black D.E.A. hats."

"Rat you out to the police for what?" I asked. I thought that he was having some kind of flashback of when he was dealing drugs all those years ago. "Nobody's following us."

"Are you kidding me?" he asked, gesturing his hand towards the car ahead of us, which was starting to exit the highway. "You're telling me that you didn't see that guy right there wearing that hat?" I looked, but the car was too far away for me to see the driver. I looked back at Nate's face. His eyes were filling with tears in his urgency to get me to see the truth. It was so bizarre, but I wondered if what he was saying was crazy enough to be true.

"No, I didn't see it. I've never seen it. Why do you think I'm going to rat you out to the police?" Just then, he flexed his jaw and shook his head. The blank stare in his eyes was gone.

"I don't—it's nothing," he said. He didn't say anything else for the rest of the car ride except to tell me to have a good day at school before dropping me off. I was too relieved that we made it to campus safely and that he seemed to be himself again by the time he dropped me off to think more about our conversation. I dismissed what had happened in the car as him having an episode, but those episodes were pretty rare as far as I knew.

Later that day when he came to pick me up, I thought about what happened in the car earlier with him hitting my head. Part of me felt sorry for him that he couldn't control the things

that nobody else could see, but another part of me was wary not to make him angry enough to hit me again. His paranoia took over at times and it was all he could do to try to convince those around him that those things were real—that he wasn't crazy. I rationalized that in his desperation to try to make me believe him, he lashed out. Wasn't I just as desperate only a short time ago when I was trying to convince him that I was really working at my parents' house? I would've done anything to make him believe me. I couldn't control the feeling of anger and pain and hopeless desperation boiling inside of me until it all came out as I vomited in a filthy parking lot. I understood his desperation. But I was still a little scared that he might hurt me again. I was quiet when I got into the car, waiting for him to break the ice so I could see what kind of mood he was in. About ten minutes into our drive, he finally spoke.

“Sorry about this morning,” he said. He shook his head as if trying to shake the demons out. He stared ahead at the road, either too ashamed or too focused to look at me. “It just comes over me sometimes and I thought I could control it, but I guess I can't.” I was relieved that he was acknowledging what happened—that he hurt me. At the time, I wouldn't allow myself to think that he *hit* me. I needed to draw lines; to make distinctions. That incident didn't fall under the category of “hit.”

“It's okay,” I said.

“It's just so hard to stop it sometimes. I can normally stop it.”

“Has it happened before?” I asked, still thinking that we were talking about him physically lashing out.

“Huh? You know it's happened before. I told you about it.”

“You’ve never told me about anything like that. Well, except for what happened with your stepdad when you were a kid, but that happened to you, not the other way around.”

“What? You think I’m talking about me knocking some sense into you?” he scoffed. “I was talking about how I can control the thoughts—the things that aren’t there.”

“Oh,” I said, barely loud enough for me to even hear myself. I stared down at my hands in my lap.

“Oh, so now you’re gonna throw yourself a pity party cuz you think I hit you? There,” he said, reaching his arm out and smacking my closed mouth with the back of his hand. I tasted blood. “That’s a hit. I didn’t hit you earlier and I wouldn’t hit you, but now you know the difference. Don’t go off telling everyone I’m some kinda woman beater cuz I’m not and you know it.”

I didn’t say anything. I leaned my head against the car window and closed my eyes, wondering what happened. How did he get so angry at me? I wanted to help him learn to control the thoughts and the anger that came out of his suffering, but I didn’t know how. I turned my face away from him as much as I could so he couldn’t see the tears silently rolling down my face.

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You didn’t think to defend yourself on that day and you wish you had. You think about how little you knew of his sickness and how you rationalized everything—that he wasn’t in control of himself and that he really didn’t want to hurt you. When you think of that day, you think you were like a character in a Lifetime movie. It makes you shudder.

If you could go back to that day, you would shake yourself awake. You want to sit yourself down and say that this is just the beginning and that this won't stop. You want to tell yourself that nobody has the right to put their hands on you, to physically hurt you or to make you cry, whether they're in control or not. Nobody has that right. You want to scream at yourself to just walk away until you actually hear yourself and do it.

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Nearly an hour later when we were closer to home, he reached out to touch my knee. I had dozed off from the exhaustion I felt, so when I felt his palm on my knee, I jumped.

"Oh, Baby. Are you afraid of me now?" he asked softly.

"No. I just wasn't expecting that. I was asleep," I answered. He gave my knee a squeeze and grabbed my hand.

"Good, I don't want you to be scared of me. I love you. You know that right?" I nodded. "Please don't make me do that again, okay?"

"I won't," I said. I knew that standing by him in his illness would be a challenge, but I didn't expect it in this way. I decided to look at my role as a challenge—I wanted to be the best, most supportive girlfriend in the history of girlfriends. I would show Nate how loving I could be.

I didn't know that I was striving for perfection that I could never attain. I would walk on eggshells, waiting for the time that Nate would be angry at me again, but hoping it would never come. It always did and I would always find myself trying to distinguish whether or not he hit me or whether or not he shoved me—did he hurt me because he was seeing things or hearing things that weren't there and couldn't make me see? Was his paranoia spiraling out of control and he didn't know what else to do to get my attention? Nate needed me.



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You could endure whatever physical pain he threw at you, but you hated to see him suffer. You didn't realize that maybe he wasn't suffering. Maybe it was your mental state that was deteriorating—over time, you didn't recognize yourself.

Looking back, you still don't recognize you.

You never stood up for yourself. You gave everything you had and wanted nothing in return, including respect. That was not the person you once were. That's not the person that you are now.

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Some days Nate was happy—he was always quick to tell me how much he loved me, how beautiful I was, and how I was the best thing that ever happened to him. He would tell me to go get dressed up so he could take me out to dinner to “show [me] off,” and those days made me happy, too. He would tell me that he was so proud of his smart girlfriend and that he just knew one day I'd publish a book and be famous. He encouraged me when I spent hours in his bedroom doing homework. He told me how important I was to him. On those days, it was easy to forget that the reason my lip was sore was because he punched me in the mouth for “complaining” or that my knees were scraped and scabbed from the time he pushed me onto the ground when I inconsiderately grabbed myself a beer and forgot to bring him one or that the bruises on my upper arms were from the time he pinned my arms down with his knees and demanded to know if I was seeing Jackson again or that sometimes I would go for days without seeing my family until the cuts, scabs, and bruises would heal—*Just busy working late at the library and going to Nate's after. I don't want to wake anyone by coming in so late*, my texts read. I always got a

cheery *Keep up the good work!* or *Good luck with your essay!* from my mom in return, and though lying to her killed me, I knew it was for the best. The last thing I wanted to do was upset my family in letting them know what I was going through and I genuinely felt that what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them. I had decided to make helping Nate *my* mission, not theirs, so they didn't have to know anything.

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You hate to tell the story of the times that he hit you, not because of the abuse itself but because you can never seem to find the words to describe how little you thought of yourself to stand up. To get away. You see the judgment in people's eyes when you tell them you still felt sorry for him—that you were in too deep to see that sheer meanness was not a symptom of mental illness. You can hear your own judgment screaming from the back of your mind: *How dare you let someone do that to you.* You blurred the lines because you wanted to. You didn't want to be alone. You didn't realize until it was too late that being with him made you more alone than you've ever felt in your life.

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The next day and sometimes just a few hours after Nate got physical with me—the wording I used in my own head instead of saying “hit me”—I could always expect a home-cooked meal from him. I thought that maybe he felt guilty about what he did, but I never asked. My survival mode lasted long after the physical altercation and I resigned myself to just be happy when he was happy. Don't ask questions.

Nate could only cook a handful of dishes: shrimp scampi, tomato basil marinated chicken, variations of macaroni and cheese, and grilled burgers. Everything was always served with a side salad and a piece of garlic bread. Even the burger, which made me laugh.

After the time that Nate hit me in the mouth on the way home from school, I took a long nap and woke up to smell of garlic. I wandered out of the bedroom and into the kitchen.

“What are you cooking?” I asked, rubbing my eyes.

“Oh, hey baby,” he said, kissing my forehead. He winked at me and said “I’m fixing you dinner. I know you like shrimp, so how does shrimp scampi sound?” His voice was so even and happy—the voice I remembered from the first day that I met him and the voice I heard every time Nate was content or excited about something.

I stood next to him while he pushed some shrimp around in the pan. He looked over at me again and touched the puffy spot on the left side of my bottom lip with his thumb. He looked down and a sob tore from his throat.

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry,” he said. He pulled me close to him and looked me right in the eye, brow furrowed, pleading with me to listen. “That will never happen again. I’m so sorry.”

He wrapped me in his arms and we stood in the kitchen, both of us crying. I cried for how badly he felt, how badly I felt, and the fact that I couldn’t bring myself to leave him. I thought that he needed me and I wasn’t going to abandon him.

“Your shrimp are gonna burn,” I said, laughing. I pulled back to signal that the hug was over and that he was forgiven. He laughed, too, and wiped his nose on his apron.

“I love you so much, you know that?” he asked.

I nodded.

For days—sometimes weeks—after an incident like the one in the car, my relationship with Nate never felt stronger. He opened doors for me, gave me back rubs while I typed essays on the computer for hours on end, cooked me dinner, did my laundry, and poured me glasses of wine to sip while I read over my homework assignments. He reverted back to the perfect boyfriend that I fell in love with.

On weekends, we would stay up late watching movies and talking. We discussed maybe getting married and having a child of our own together.

“I just know I’m meant to be a mom,” I said. “I want to have a baby someday, but not until I finish school and have a decent job.”

“You probably want to get married first, don’t you?” he asked. He squeezed my leg and smiled.

“I don’t want to be a single parent!” I squeezed his leg back and smiled. “I mean, if you can’t behave yourself, I guess I’ll have to be.” We both laughed and our conversation ended in kisses.

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When you think back on those nights, you can’t believe you let yourself be bought with a dinner you yourself could make in the microwave. You can’t believe that a hot meal and an apology won you over, but it did. It gave you hope and hope was the thing that kept that relationship going. You hoped that his kindness would last, and it did...until it didn’t.

## Eleven

Despite the countless times I had scraped the bottom of my piece of shit car on the mammoth speedbump entering Nate's apartment complex, I still received scowls from the cholos standing around in the parking lot. The cholos scared me—as did their loud fights with their girlfriends at all hours of the night. I begged Nate on countless occasions to come with me to my parents' house so we could hang out with my family and I could feel safe. He used to comply with my requests, but he eventually stopped. I'm sure the cholos could all smell my fear of them, but I also didn't want my parents to hear Nate say “fuck” every other word, so I tried to ignore the stares from the cholos and stayed with Nate at his place. He was good at hiding his filthy mouth and his episodes of rage in front of my parents, but the longer I stayed with him, the worse his behavior got and I worried that my parents would see it. Besides, I was beginning to feel that it didn't really matter where I was; I never felt safe anyway.

Nate made sure of that.

I thought that surely the cholos would warm up to me eventually, especially since I spent nearly every day there. They would refer to me as the rich girl, though I was far from it. I also overheard them talking about how I was betraying my race by being with the white man, but they were so friendly with Nate. I didn't understand, but I didn't question it. Their furrowed brows told me I didn't belong, and the number of times I had to clean out what I'm pretty sure was human shit out of my car's echo tip muffler told me that my car wasn't welcome in the complex either.

“Hey,” I'd tell them, lifting an index finger from the steering wheel in a miniature wave.

Sometimes, I spent at least five minutes with my car straddling the speedbump, too nervous to honk my horn at the cholos standing in the driveway, apparently oblivious to the rumble coming from my exhaust. I just sat and waited until they made barely enough room between the group of them, my car brushing their sagging starched jeans as I inched my way by, praying that I didn't run over a foot or worse, scuffing a shell-toed Adidas with my tire.

"Watch out, puta rich girl," they said, leaning into my open window, thin golden crosses hanging from their necks. Men of God.

I don't know what about peeling red paint, exposed yellow foam in the seat cushions, and one cloudy, but working, headlight on a '93 Eclipse that was more than a decade old said "rich girl" to them, put that's what I became known as around the apartment complex. The whole idea of being the rich girl was laughable enough to me, considering my family's lackluster financial background, but it actually made me giggle and shake my head when I pulled into a parking spot next to one of their candy painted Cadillacs. Sometimes when I pulled in, the cholos were standing around listening to music bumping from the open trunk of their car. Sometimes four of them were sitting in the car, watching the flat-screened TVs in the headrests and the dashboard. But *I* was the rich girl. When Nate was around, I was revered as his pretty girlfriend by all the cholos and I didn't understand their sudden shift in attitude.

One day, I arrived at Nate's apartment complex after dark. I had been at school all day and the commute home had been hellacious. Nate had expected me nearly an hour before I pulled into the driveway. I stopped counting the phone calls demanding to know my whereabouts at around twenty, and soon after that, the phone calls themselves stopped. It didn't matter how many previous times I answered the phone and told him I was still sitting in traffic—the same question was repeated on the other end of the receiver. The alternative was silence, and silence

from Nate was never good—I worried that he was planning what to scream at me or if his illness would convince him that I was cheating and he’d lash out in a different way. I passed the cholos, who I wouldn’t be able to see if it weren’t for the glowing cigarette ends and wife beaters reflecting the moonlight. One of them flicked his smoldering cigarette end into my car. I smashed it out with a plastic water bottle I found rolling around in the backseat, but it had already burned a hole in my passenger seat. As I pulled into a parking spot, Nate called again and I was instantly filled with relief.

“Hey, I’m sorry about—“ I started. He cut me off.

“What the fuck did he want, Stefanie?” His voice was low, hoarse. My heart started racing again and I could feel the tingling sensation creeping up my face; I tried to think of anyone that Nate might be talking about. I didn’t want to give the impression that I was playing dumb. I thought about how I stopped by my professor’s office before heading home that day. It was common for me to recount every detail of my day to Nate, per his demands, so it didn’t surprise me that the fact that I was a little later getting to his house than normal, traffic or not, would put him on alert.

“My teacher? I wanted him to write me a recommendation letter.”

“Not your FUCKING TEACHER. This morning, when you left the house. What did he talk to you about? I fuckin’ saw it happening, so don’t fuckin’ lie to me.” I could tell that his jaw was clenched so tight that he was barely able to spit the words through his bared teeth. This was a common way of speaking to me for him—so angry that he’s grinding his teeth into dust. I didn’t have to see it to know what his face looked like.

“Can we just talk about this inside? I’m here now.”

“I’m not at the house,” he said. “I’m running an errand. Now answer me.” I tried to think of anything Nate’s brother, Gabriel, might have said to me before he left for work that morning, but nothing came to mind. In fact, I couldn’t even remember if I saw his brother that morning. Nate had become increasingly paranoid that Gabriel wanted to fuck me because his enormously pregnant girlfriend was always too tired for sex. I had made it clear to Nate that Gabriel was far too vulgar, rude, and unattractive to me for me to ever want to fuck him, but Nate refused to listen. Though I didn’t recognize it at the time, I lived for pleasing Nate, even when I knew I couldn’t. It was in my head that I would never find anyone better who wanted me in return and this mattered to me more than my own safety. I didn’t want to be alone and I didn’t want to prove my own word to be false after I vowed to never leave him the same way his past girlfriends had.

Gabriel had also been known to share Nate’s meth-dealing duties back when Nate was dealing, which was another reason I was wary of him. I was concerned that they’d resort to old habits if they spent too much time together and I didn’t think Nate should tempt himself.

“I didn’t see Gabriel this morning.”

“Goddamn, not Gabriel. Rhino! What did Rhino want?” Nate had apparently allowed his jaw to unhinge. He yelled. I winced.

Rhino’s name didn’t leave much to imagination. The guy looked like a WWE wrestler with a neck as thick as my waist. His jacket disguised the bowling balls tucked in his sleeves and his legs suggested that he squatted small cars for a workout. The fake tan he sported suggested that he actually might be a competitive bodybuilder. On that particular morning when I left the apartment to head to school, Rhino was leaning against his truck, parked next to my car. I was



surprised to see anyone else outside because I normally left the apartment just as the sun was coming up, but I offered a tight-lipped smile in his direction. I had seen him a few times at Nate's apartment, but he was usually ducking out as soon as I arrived. Everything I knew about Rhino, I learned from Nate, and Nate told me never to speak to Rhino. That time, Rhino spoke to me.

"Hey, it's Stefanie, right?" He reached out his hand to crush mine in what I think was meant to be a handshake. I nodded.

"Cool. I'm Ryan, but I'm sure you know they call me Rhino. Listen, I have a question and it's important that you answer honestly." I nodded, my heart starting to speed up. I had no idea what he was going to ask and whether I could—or even should—give him an honest answer. It seemed like I didn't know how to function around people anymore. Nate had made it his mission to isolate me from everyone by making me question my relationships with family and friends. The more I tried to go to my parents' house to visit, the more Nate questioned why I would want to hang out with people who obviously didn't care about me as much as he did, if they were more interested in arguing than they were in spending time together. If I tried to argue that my family wasn't like that—that he was distorting what I was saying—he grabbed my chin and stood inches away from me to tell me he didn't want to hear it.

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When he hits you and grabs your face and tries to make you *just listen*, your survival instinct kicks in. You don't think about *why* he's doing it. You think about how you can get it to stop. And after it stops, you can only think of what you can do differently in the future so you

don't make him that angry again. It doesn't occur to you that the only way you can change his reaction in the future is by not being around to see it. It doesn't occur to you to save yourself.

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At this point, I didn't know who the bad guys were supposed to be anymore and who I wasn't supposed to share information with or who it was okay to talk to. Rhino seemed nice enough and I didn't want to think about what would happen if he knew I didn't answer him honestly, so I told myself that I'd give him the truth—whatever he wanted.

“Does Nate ever hang with the cholos around here? I mean, have you ever seen him talking to them or anything?” I had seen more than that, but I told myself to answer only what he wanted to know. I nodded.

“Cool. Have they been in the apartment before?” he asked, jerking his head towards Nate's front door. I had no idea what to say and apparently Rhino could tell. A panic attack manifested itself as a creeping numbness starting in my fingertips and within seconds, my whole right hand felt like dead weight. I shook it. Nothing.

“Nevermind—that's all I wanted to know. Nice meeting you, Stefanie.” He crushed my hand again and I watched it turn white then a splotchy pink when he released it, but I couldn't feel it this time; he climbed in his truck and started the engine.

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You held your breath while you recounted the conversation before you spoke again, but even as the words came out, your chest was tight, like you still weren't breathing.

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On the phone with Nate, I gripped the steering wheel with one hand and my cellphone with the other.

“I’m not going to ask again,” Nate said. “What did you say to Rhino?”

“He asked about the cholos.”

Silence.

“What did he ask about the cholos? You better tell me everything, Stefanie.” Nate’s voice was eerily low and calm again. I rolled my window up, nervous that the cholos had already overheard too much from me, though I didn’t know what might be bad about Nate having anything to do with the cholos. I thought I was doing my best to keep their secrets.

“He just asked if you guys were friends or something like that. Like, if you guys ever hang out. I told him that you talk to them sometimes, but that I didn’t think y’all were friends. That’s it. Was I supposed to say something different?” I tried to minimize the damage I’m not sure I’d done, but my words were met with silence.

“Hello?” I asked.

“Okay. It’s okay. I’m not mad at you. I just want to make sure we’re doing the right thing,” Nate said. He hung up the phone and I didn’t know who “we” was or what they’re hoping was the right thing. I got out of the car and walked to Nate’s front door to wait inside for him, something I’d done before if I beat Nate home from work and Gabriel’s girlfriend was there to let me in.

Just before I knocked, I saw a pair of eyes peeking out from between the blinds in the window next to the front door. The door opened and Gabriel’s pregnant girlfriend grabbed my

wrist, yanking me inside. Someone slammed the door behind me and I heard the locks being systematically turned and slid into place. I heard the sound of leaves crunching under my feet and my shoes slid a bit, only when I looked down, there were no leaves, only an opaque plastic sheet.

I looked back up to survey the living room and I saw that it wasn't the same way that I left it this morning. The couch was gone. The entertainment center was gone. The coffee table was gone. There was only plastic. It was covering the walls, the ceiling, the floor, the windows—everything—held together by duct tape that had been haphazardly torn by teeth and smashed down into place. I tried to make sense of the scene, wondering why nobody told me we were going to paint the living room that night, but I couldn't understand why all the walls are covered if we were supposed to paint.

“What—“ I started to ask. Gabriel—nearly a head taller than Nate and twice his weight—shoved me down and I slid into the corner.

“Shhh! Shut the fuck up. It's your fault we're here now,” he said.

The hallway and the kitchen were sealed off, too; the living room was a stand-alone plastic box. My eyes started to water and I wondered where Nate was, but I was too scared to speak. It became clear that there was a family reunion taking place—two of Nate's brothers, the pregnant girlfriend, an uncle, a cousin, and Nate's best friend all stood in the plastic living room. They were taking turns looking out the back window, the front window, and the peephole in the front door, occasionally glancing back at me with their wild, raccoon eyes. It looked like they hadn't slept for weeks. They kept shifting around the room to look out the windows. Nobody ever paused.

Then my eyes focused and my brain started working in overdrive trying to make sense of the scene around me. My face was numb and I felt my stomach contracting. I closed my eyes to try to calm myself so that I wouldn't vomit all over the plastic floor, but when I opened my eyes, everything in the room was still out of place to me. My body jumped as a chill ran over me—something that I can still only describe as a terror chill. The pregnant girlfriend was holding a tire iron, one of the brothers was holding an aluminum bat that I had seen his son use for baseball, and everyone else held an assortment of weapons: crow bars, what I think is the bar from a weightlifting bench, wooden bats. Then something flashed in the muted light above my head and I saw that Gabriel was carrying an axe. My stomach tensed, but I stayed on the ground. I closed my eyes again, willing the rising bile in my throat to stay down—to not reveal my fear to the room—and when I opened my eyes, I realized that they weren't even looking at me. They were waiting for someone.

“Did you see Rhino when you drove up? Was his truck out there?” the brother asked me.

“No. Where's Nate?” I whimpered, barely audible. At this moment, I wanted him there with me. Being at his apartment always made me fearful of what was going on outside or upstairs, but Nate did always make me feel protected from outsiders. He was the oldest brother; I knew if they tried to hurt me, he would stop them.

“He's out. He'll be back,” Gabriel said. The uncle turned away from the window to look at me, the plastic cracking under his feet. His protruding gut, one that rivaled the pregnant girlfriend's belly, brushed against the window frame. A button on his fading grey flannel shirt caught the window's edge, but managed to cling to the shirt and not pop off. He raised his tan, weathered hand and wagged a knotted finger at me.

“Why the fuck would you tell Rhino Nate’s business? He fuckin’ told you not to ever speak to Rhino and now you done fucked it all up,” he said.

“I didn’t tell Rhino anything,” I said. Then I finally said out loud what I had long thought of Gabriel and his girlfriend: “You guys are fucking crazy.”

And then the pregnant girlfriend who was surprisingly spry was standing over me and telling me that it was my fault. I didn’t know what was my fault, but I worried about the tire iron and I was instantly sorry that I told a plastic room full of people with weapons that they were crazy, even if that’s secretly what I believed.

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When you tell this story now—about the time you almost lived through an episode of Dexter—you laugh at the absurdity. It was absurd then, too, but not as funny in the moment. If you hadn’t heard that his family had done this before, almost like a scare tactic, you would’ve been more concerned for what was going to happen to a seemingly innocent person. But you knew better. They were all talk.

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There was pounding on the front door and somebody unlocked all the locks to let Nate in. The plastic crinkled with every step he took toward me. He squatted down in front of me.

“I told you not to speak to Rhino,” he said. He flexed his jaw and spit the words through his teeth, voice so low I could barely hear him.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what I said. I’m sorry.” I started to cry and I couldn’t look at him anymore. I was embarrassed that he was scolding me in front of his family, but I was more embarrassed that I had gone against one simple request: don’t speak to Rhino.

“I’m not mad,” he said, “but now we’re gonna kill that motherfucker and you’re either gonna watch because you deserve to watch or you’re gonna get the fuck out of here and actually listen to me when I tell you not to fuckin’ talk.” He scratched at the scabby crucifix tattoo covering his forearm.

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Even though you believed that nothing was going to happen, you look back at this moment and see it as your all-time-low. What if something had happened? You count yourself lucky that you were right.

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“Okay, I’m sorry.”

“Alright. I’ll call you tomorrow,” he said, helping me to my feet and escorting me to my car. We stood outside in the sticky air and I saw the flickering orange glow of cigarette ends watching me from a distance before I buried my head in Nate’s shoulder. He snaked his arm around my waist and whispered to me.

“You can’t say anything about this.” I wiped my snot into Nate’s shirt when I shook my head—*I won’t*. A very small part of me was fearful for Rhino, but I genuinely doubted that he would come by the apartment that night—he rarely did—and Nate had boasted before about how he and his brothers liked to “scare” people. A much bigger part of me was worried that Nate’s

mind was slipping further into frightening, unknown territory and that I wouldn't know how to help him come back.

I got into my car and started the engine, the roar of my muffler letting the whole apartment complex know that I'm leaving. The bottom of my car scraped the speedbump on my exit.

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You knew that his family talked a big talk. Some of them, anyway. They always spouted off how they were going to kill the next person who pissed them off. You knew they'd pulled that trick before on someone—scaring them into staying the hell away from the family. You knew they never followed through. You were scared that they might hurt you when you cowered in the corner of the room that day, but you knew they wouldn't kill you or anyone else that crossed the threshold that day. Something was off about them, but you knew they wouldn't really hurt anyone.

You learned later that they were all on a meth bender that lasted for days. You're embarrassed that you couldn't tell. You were so naïve when it came to anything involving drugs or a lifestyle that you were only accustomed to through episodes of "Law & Order."

But what you can't get out of your head now is that you let them treat you like that. You didn't get in your car and never look back. Maybe they provided a different form of tension that was easier to deal with because it wasn't your own family.



## Twelve

A few days later, I thought he was having another episode. He was supposed to pick me up from work, but he never showed. I called his sister, Michaela, to see if she could pick me up. Nate had recently moved out of Gabriel's house so they could make room for the new baby—or that's the story he told Gabriel. After the terrifying incident of the near murder, I demanded that Nate move out or I wouldn't be coming over anymore. Michaela graciously let him move in after discussing it with her live-in girlfriend, Alex. They both knew of Nate's history with drug abuse and with a four-year-old of their own in the house, they wanted to make absolutely certain that Nate would not be a risk to their family. They didn't know about what happened at Gabriel's apartment. I kept my mouth shut so as to not make Nate angry again and everyone else understood that whatever happened—or didn't happen, really—was hush-hush. Alex was quick to defend Nate, saying that he was a different person now that he was dating me and that she'd be happy to have him move in with them.

Michaela and Alex's house was much nicer than Gabriel's apartment. It was a three bedroom, limestone house in a nice neighborhood. Trees lined the street and everyone's lawn was a lush green. Michaela's house had high, arched ceilings and a kitchen with marble countertops, a spacious living room that was littered with her son's toys and a wide, oak dining room table that the four of us frequently used to play cards and board games. Michaela and Alex had pictures of their happy family hanging up all over the house. Handmade quilts draped over the backs of loveseats and the entertainment unit was often the centerpiece of cutthroat video game competitions between Alex, Nate, and whatever cousins happened to stop by on the evenings.

“Are you ready to get your ass kicked in Rock Band?” was the standard greeting for cousins entering Michaela and Alex’s home.

“Bring it!” was the standard response.

Hours of playing video games turned into nights full of stomach aches from laughing so hard. Video games brought out the family’s competitive nature and watching the battles between family members became a regular source of entertainment for Nate and me. On those nights, I felt like a part of the family. Nate kept his arm around me all night and constantly showered me with compliments about how pretty I was and how glad he was to have someone like me that gets along so well with his family. On those nights, I felt really loved.

One day, Michaela brought me back to their house after work and I was surprised to see my car sitting in the driveway. I thought that maybe Nate decided to take a nap after work and slept through his alarm, which had happened before. Michaela had to go pick up her son from daycare and Alex was still at work, so she gave me a house key to let myself in. I had a lot of homework to do, so I decided to slip in the house and work quietly while Nate slept. I expected Nate to be asleep in his bedroom, but he was lying on the bed watching TV when I tried creeping in.

“Oh, you’re awake,” I said, surprised. “I tried calling you when I got off work.”

“Ha,” Nate said, flipping through channels. I wasn’t sure if he was laughing at me or at the TV, but either way, the laugh seemed menacing.

“Is something wrong?” I asked. I sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Really? You’re gonna ask if something’s wrong?” He still wouldn’t look at me.

“Yeah, what’s the matter?” Before I could even finish the last word, Nate flew across the bed at me and pinned me down on the mattress, his hand pressing down on my throat while his

other hand pinned down one of my arms. I grabbed his wrist, trying to pry his hand off my airway, but nothing was happening. He kept squeezing.

“You wanna tell me why when I go to pick up my girlfriend from work, her ex-fucking-boyfriend is there?” I gasped for air. Perhaps realizing that I couldn’t answer his question because of the choke-hold he had on me, he loosened his grip a bit, but kept his hand firmly in the same spot on my neck. Survival mode kicked in and I knew I had to do anything to get him to calm down. I had to be specific in what I said and as even-tempered as possible, which wasn’t hard for me to do.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t even know who you’re talking about.” It was true. I hadn’t had any visitors while at work, and as far as I knew, my ex-boyfriend, Jackson, had no idea where I worked. Besides, he lived in Houston—nowhere near my job.

“Jackson, Stefanie. I saw him there, sitting in his car outside.”

“No you didn’t. He lives almost four hours away.” Nate squeezed my throat harder. I could feel my eyes start to bulge. I made a feeble attempt at shaking my head. Nate loosened his grip just before I thought I would pass out, but again, kept his hand on my throat.

“I know what I saw.” He spat his words through bared teeth. It hadn’t occurred to me until he said those words that Nate had no idea what Jackson even looked like, so how would he know if it was him?

“What car was he driving?” I asked.

“Why does it fucking matter? Why don’t you tell me, since you were the one who apparently wanted him to come visit?” In the last few weeks, he started asking me questions, seemingly out of nowhere, about whether or not I wished I could get back together with Jackson. My answer was always the same: “No, why would I want to be with someone who ignored me

and strung me along for so long?” I searched Nate’s eyes for any indication that he was having an episode, but I couldn’t find anything. He stared back, but it was like a different person’s eyes were looking back at me. I couldn’t tell if he genuinely thought that I was cheating on him with Jackson and was trying to trick me into saying something I wasn’t going to say or if he actually drove to my work and believed he was seeing someone who wasn’t there.

“Was he driving a white mustang with stickers all over the back?” I asked.

A low rumble came from deep in Nate’s throat.

“I fucking *knew* it. Yeah, that was him. I drove up, saw you sweeping the patio, then I saw Jackson’s car. I *knew* you were fucking him again, so I left.” For a brief moment, I wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of what was happening. I knew that I was telling the truth, but Nate telling me that he saw me sweeping the patio confirmed that he did drive up to my work and I just missed seeing him there. But I also knew that Nate’s paranoia was so unpredictable and now it was spilling over into details of our relationship instead of just worrying about fiction D.E.A. agents following us around.

“Jackson drives a green Ford Explorer. He lives in Houston. Now *get the fuck off me*.” I could see that Nate was surprised at my words—he loosened his grip and I shoved him off, grabbing my purse that I set down on the floor. I worried that because nobody was around at the time, Nate might actually try to kill me while in the middle of one of his episodes and nobody would hear me scream. I looked back at him and told him I was going to my parents’ for a while. He followed me out to my car.

“No, Stef, don’t go.” He started to cry. “Please, I saw him there. I *saw* him.”

“Nate, think about it: you don’t know what he looks like. How could you have seen him there?” I opened the driver’s side door. I wanted to stay—to help him realize that what he was

seeing wasn't real. That he needed help that I couldn't give him. But it wasn't like being at Gabriel's apartment, with Gabriel and his girlfriend or any one of the neighbors we shared walls with close enough to save me if things got out of control. He kept crying.

"Please don't leave right now. Please," he said. His voice was getting louder. He looked up and down the street, searching for something or someone.

"I will be back later. I promise." I didn't want to tell him that I was afraid he would see more things that weren't there or think I was some D.E.A. agent and that he'd try to strangle me. His strength was something I couldn't even dream of matching when he was angry.

"Is this how it happens?" he asked. I stopped myself from sliding into the driver's seat.

"How what happens?" My heart was already racing, but my fingers started to tingle. I thought that he was going to tell me it was over if I left. I already felt that I was abandoning him when he needed me, but I wasn't sure I could take him saying that. "How what happens, Nate?"

"Are they coming? Right now, are they coming?" he looked up and down the street again. It was like I wasn't even standing there. His whole demeanor was different—he shrank back from me and fear washed over his face. His whole body started to tremble and I could see that something in him had genuinely changed.

"Who?"

"Are they coming to arrest me right now?" He frantically searched the front yard. "The F.B.I., Stefanie. You're really doing this to me? You called the F.B.I.?" When he finally settled his gaze at me, he looked as if I killed his best friend. The look he gave me—disappointment, hurt, pain that seemed to know no depth—broke my heart. He was still shaking and his voice was almost childlike. I shut the car door and walked around to the other side of the car where he

stood. I wrapped him in a hug and pulled him down to the ground with me where we sat in the grass together.

“No, Nate. There’s no F.B.I.” I put my head on his shoulder while he sobbed deep, guttural cries that I was sure would alert a neighbor to come investigate. Nobody came out. “It’s just us. No F.B.I.”

We stayed that way for what felt like hours until Michaela came home. Her son ran to Nate and jumped on top of him before Michaela could even shut the car door behind the little boy. They laughed and collapsed back on the grass while Michaela’s son animatedly described his day at school. All was forgotten.

I felt sorry for him. At times it seemed that he knew what he believed to be true actually wasn’t, but it seemed so real to him that he couldn’t shake the thought that maybe he was right. Maybe it was all real. Those times, I saw how truly sick he was and I couldn’t leave him, even when I thought I wanted to.

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The home-cooked meals, movies together on the couch, and alone time spent just talking became increasingly rare between you and Nate. You loved the person that you knew at the beginning—the one who said all the right things and who would make you feel like the only person in the room. As the relationship went on, you felt like the only person on the planet—you were so lonely.

He became all you had.

You were too embarrassed to go back to your parents. You couldn’t live with them knowing how you let everything get so out of control. On the few occasions that you stopped in

every week, you pretended to be happy. Part of you was happy when Nate was happy. Part of you was happy that you were doing well in school.

You went to class on time, turned in your homework, and controlled every element of your school life that you could. You were a star student. But the other part of your life—the part with Nate in it—was scary. You didn't recognize yourself in that part of your life.

## Thirteen

As far as I knew, my 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday was going to be spent at Michaela's house. Nothing big. It fell on a Sunday, and everyone would have to be at work early the next morning. I knew my parents would have a cake and a few gifts for me at home, just like every birthday and I appreciated the stability of the gesture. They cared about me and I felt their love mainly through the support they showed me by helping me with my commute to campus, offering me cash the few times they had it to spare, and the general sense of pride they exuded when telling friends and neighbors about my accomplishments at school. But I still felt the tension between my mom and dad now that he was back from Ohio. Apparently their time apart hadn't been long enough.

One night, I went back home to finish an essay and use my mom's printer. I was there for less than an hour when my dad came home and the arguing started.

"We cannot pay rent because you keep buying yourself lunch," my mom said. She was washing dishes, but all I could hear from my bedroom was yelling and the clattering of dishes in the sink.

"It isn't just me that's spending money."

"You are unbelievable."

"I hate living like this."

"I hate it, too."

Though I still loved Nate—or the idea of someone caring about me and wanting to spend time with me—I loved my parents in a different way. I couldn't stand the idea of either of them hurting. It pained me in a way that hurt worse than any physical pain I'd endured with Nate. They were good people and they didn't deserve pain. I didn't deserve pain, either, but at the time, I wasn't sure I deserved anything good or bad.



At first, I appreciated the “break” that Nate gave me from my parents, but the longer I was away from my family, the more I wanted to be back with them, something that Nate did not want. Gradually, the time I spent with Nate in between all those events became more tense than anything I’d ever experienced at my parents’ house, but I was already in too deep—I didn’t think I wanted to leave Nate, but even if I did, I wasn’t sure how to do it. He knew where I lived, worked, and went to school, not to mention what my schedule was like every day. I couldn’t escape him if I tried.

Nate dictated when I would go somewhere and whether or not he would be coming along with me, so I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to visit with my family for a few hours on my birthday before getting some more homework done or, more likely, arguing with Nate about something. He hated going to my parents’ house because he feared that they were silently judging him for everything he’d done to me, though he saw every act of verbal or physical abuse as something that I made him do. He was good at maintaining the appearance of a loving boyfriend, but at times, he slipped up and acknowledged that he wasn’t. Those times came in his increased insecurity about spending time with my parents. He worried that they could see through the charade.

In reality, my family knew nothing about the horrors I experienced in my relationship. Nobody did. Still, the fact that Nate grilled me about conversations I had with my family and friends made me wonder if he was just checking to see if I’d told anyone about the nature of our relationship. I knew that if I told anyone, Nate would either leave me or punish me and neither of those options seemed acceptable for me at the time, so I kept my mouth shut. I still thought that physically being alone was worse than being with Nate. I rationalized that if I was alone, I wouldn’t have any other purpose to leave my parents’ house when they argued, nor would I have

anyone telling me how much they loved me all the time. Granted, I wouldn't have anyone slapping me in the face or worse, either, but that thought didn't occur to me at the time.

"They don't know anything," I told him on the Saturday afternoon before my actual birthday, explaining that he should come with me. I was in the middle of folding his laundry when the interrogation came on. He cut me off before I could get to the dresser to put his shirts away. Like he was hiding something. "I promise, they don't," I continued. It was the truth. If he came with me, I wouldn't have to try to recall every detail of my conversations, confirming that I didn't cast him in a negative light.

"So you don't talk about me with your parents? Your sisters don't even know anything about me then?" Immediately after the question came out of his mouth, I could see his square jaw flexing. He raised an eyebrow waiting for my answer.

"Well, yeah, I mean, we do talk about you—"

"Which is it, Stefanie? You talk about me or you don't? You just said that you don't talk about me and I have a hard time understanding why my girlfriend who is supposed to love me so much doesn't even talk about me with her family."

"I mean that they don't know anything about our problems." I wasn't saying the right thing, but I didn't know how to get out of the hole I had dug myself all for the sake of trying to reassure him. I could feel my stomach tightening and worried that I would actually throw up. I couldn't even dream of what he might do if I got something as disgusting as vomit all over his work shirts.

"What problems?" His tone had softened and the question was barely audible. I remembered a beach clean-up trip in high school; I came across a coiled diamondback rattlesnake nestled in a sand dune. One of the chaperones was only a few feet away when my

friend and I peeled back a plastic bag full of sand and found the snake lying beneath it. The chaperone stayed standing where he was, but calmly instructed us to walk backwards towards him. *Slowly*, he told us. *Don't be scared*.

"I just meant how we fight sometimes." I almost laughed at the absurdity of such an understatement statement, but fear gripped my insides. I unfolded a pair of his jeans and went to work refolding in the perfect book-fold I learned working my shitty retail job back in high school. He wrapped his arms around my waist and rested his chin on my shoulder. For a moment, I expected the embrace to turn violent—he'd yank my head back by my ponytail and get as close to my ear as possible so I was sure to hear every single word he had to say. I concentrated on the rising bile in my throat in hopes of keeping it down.

"Aw baby, you think we fight too much?" he asked, then kissed my ear. His voice was almost sing-song. Relieved, I turned to face him, his arms still wrapped around me. He pulled back a bit so I was looking right into his eyes.

"Just lately. I feel like—" I inhaled deeply, but the air caught in my throat before I could stop myself from saying anything else. "I feel like sometimes I can't do anything right. Just sometimes." He pulled me into a tight hug. I hugged him back, feeling safe from the anger that just moments ago choked me into silence, but seemed to be dissipating now that I was secure in his arms.

"Do anything right like telling your fucking family about your boyfriend? About your mean ol' boyfriend that treats you like shit? About how he makes you cry all the goddamn time?" His questions were escalating in volume and his hug was so tight I couldn't take a deep breath.

"No, that's not what I meant—" My heart was racing.

“Bullshit! I know exactly what you meant. You can never say anything nice about me and you know it.”

“I do—” He grabbed both of my shoulders and pushed me hard so that I stumbled back onto the pile of laundry on the bed.

“I do everything for you. *Everything*. And you can’t say one nice thing about me.” He actually didn’t look as angry as he usually did. There was no clenched jaw. No spitting words through bared teeth. He shook his head and looked away, incredulous. “I don’t even know why I put up with this shit.”

“I’m sorry.” I thought about what else I could say here—that I did love him and that when things were good, they were really good. He made me feel pretty. Wanted. Needed. But I also thought about telling him that I worried that his paranoia was something that was becoming too big for either of us to handle, that he needed a therapist, that on the very rare occasion when he took one of his medications, he was easier to handle, and that even though I thought I deserved better treatment from him most of the time, I wouldn’t ever leave a sick man. But instead I bit the inside of my cheek and tried not to cry. I couldn’t say anything more than “I’m sorry” over and over because anything more could potentially push the argument into physical territory that had been proven before that I couldn’t win.

“Save it,” he said before I watched him walk out of the bedroom. The front door slamming shook the bedroom window; my car’s engine fired up before he peeled out of the driveway. I continued folding perfect stacks of clothes, leaving them out on the bed for him to put away whenever he decided to return.

The tears started to flow once I knew he was halfway down the block and wouldn’t get a chance to see them. Sometimes when I cried in front of him, something inside Nate clicked and

he became apologetic almost to the point of whimpering about how sorry he was for the way that he treated me. I would smooth the hair on the back of his head and tell him that I knew he didn't mean it. I knew he didn't want to be mean to me. More often than those times, his anger escalated into something unpredictable. He would throw whatever was closest to him against the wall, usually shattering the object. Sometimes I was that closest thing. I never knew which version of Nate I would get if I were to cry in front of him, so I did my best to keep my tears hidden until I was alone. If I couldn't be alone, I'd just swallow them, knowing that he would soon be over whatever he was angry at me for and he would eventually give my ponytail a playful yank before he'd kiss me on the cheek and tell me how pretty I was that day, making me feel wanted. During those times, I could almost completely forget his rage.

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Every time you folded another stack of laundry, you thought you were being nice. You thought that's what good girlfriends did because your boyfriend worked long hours and it's not like he did laundry very well anyway. He was bound to put a red towel in with the whites. You were just helping.

And the times that you told him it was okay after he yelled at you or hit you or was mean to you make your stomach turn now when you think about it. You'd bury someone for doing that to you now. You'd bury someone for doing that to you before you met him. You damn sure wouldn't take shit from anybody before you met him and you'd be damned to do it now. Why was he different? You couldn't explain your behavior then. Responses became robotic. Your hand smoothed his hair and your mouth said "It's okay, you didn't mean it," but you felt nothing. You just went through the motions. Maybe it started as your survival response—you'd do

anything to calm him down and make sure he was happy. You'd do anything to bring back that hope that he'd change back into the man that he was when you met him.

But then you remind yourself that you knew people didn't change. Why did you think he was any different? He never changed. He stayed the man you met the whole time, but you just started learning his secrets. But why him? Why did you let it all slide?

You know your head was cloudy and you viewed the world as a place that this behavior—from him, from you—was normal. You want to be able to pinpoint a time when it all started, but it's not that simple.

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A few hours later, Michaela came into the bedroom where I was taking a nap. That's usually what I did if Nate wasn't around—I couldn't do anything to get myself into trouble if I was taking a nap and I was generally pretty exhausted from being unable to relax when he was around.

Michaela flipped on the light. "Wake up, birthday girl!" she said, running to pounce on the bed.

"It's not 'til tomorrow," I said, throwing my arm over my eyes to hide them from the light.

"What's the plan? What did Nate decide? Where are we going?" She rattled off a hundred questions before I could interject. Spouses and boyfriends and girlfriend typically did all the party planning for their significant others in Nate's family, so Michaela assumed that Nate wouldn't operate any differently.

"I don't think we're doing anything."

“Uh, no. We ARE doing something. Get dressed. I’ll call him.” There had been a handful of times that Michaela had seen Nate getting angry with me. He was never physical with me in front of anyone else, but she had seen his temper escalate as he started to yell at me. In those moments, she would watch for a moment—maybe seeing if I was going to defend myself?—and once she’d seen enough, she would put her hand on his shoulder and say something like “C’mon Bro—whatever this is about can’t be that bad!” in attempt to get him to smile. I admired her fearlessness of him, but I thought maybe she didn’t know what to be afraid of. At the time, I wasn’t sure if she knew what his anger made him capable of. Either way, she knew about his poor financial situation—that I’d have to lend him money because his boss was cutting back his hours or the boss was unwilling to pay him, according to Nate—and it appeared that she didn’t want me to have to fund my own birthday celebration.

Within half an hour, Michaela had rallied most of the extended family and several members had already arrived at the house. The first uncle arrived with a twelve pack of Tecate and some limes, signaling the start to my pre-party party. More uncles, aunts, and cousins started filtering in. Michaela’s girlfriend, Alex, was in the living room already battling one of the men at Guitar Hero. Nirvana’s “Heart Shaped Box,” minus a few well-placed notes, blasted over the television speakers, but I figured they were doing well enough playing the game if I could somewhat recognize the song. Kelsey, Nate’s ex-wife, and her husband sat on the couch, sipping beers and laughing at Nate and Alex. At times, I wondered what Nate’s relationship was like with Kelsey. I had a feeling that he hadn’t told me the whole truth earlier when he said that they just “grew apart,” but I didn’t want to seem like a weak woman, so I didn’t confide in her or anyone. If his relationship with her was different and they really had just gone their separate ways, I didn’t want to think about what it was about me that made things different.

I was standing in the doorway of the bathroom watching Nate's youngest sister, Liz, showing Michaela her new fake ID.

"See?" she said, flashing the card at an obviously disapproving Michaela. "It looks just like me! They won't take it away from me at the clubs."

"No, Liz. That's not the point," Michaela started. She put down her eyeliner pencil and looked at Liz in the mirror. "You're super pregnant. People are gonna look at you weird if you go to a club at all." Though Michaela wasn't the oldest sibling, she was the most stable, which was something I learned as I got to know Nate's family better. She was the mother hen to all the chicks. She had a stable job and home, a loving partner and adorable young son. She had the life that I wanted. By the time I realized Nate wasn't as stable as I thought he was when I met him, I already cared too much for him to leave him. I couldn't leave him alone in a family with members that proved to be mentally unhinged. He saved me from the uneasiness I felt in my family, so I felt obligated to save him from his.

"I don't even care. They can look at me weird while I do this." Liz doubled over and pressed her rear end against Michaela's lap and started bouncing her butt up and down. I shook my head and walked into Nate's bedroom to search for something to wear. I hadn't forgotten about our argument earlier, but I was willing to let it go because I didn't want to fight on my birthday.

Nate walked in sometime during all the commotion of sisters applying make-up in the bathroom, brothers and uncles having a beer together in the kitchen, and me searching for a shirt to wear in the closet.

"Wear the red sweater," he said, leaning against the doorframe.



I jumped at the sound of his voice, unaware that he was back in the house. He crossed the room and pulled me into another tight hug. My face was smashed against his shoulder. I waited for him to say something.

“I’m sorry, baby. I shouldn’t have stormed out of the house earlier.”

“It’s okay.” My voice was muffled.

“I know, but sometimes you just make me so wired. I didn’t want things to get ugly, so I had to leave. You understand, right?”

“Yes.”

“Just don’t get me all wired like that again, okay?”

“Okay.”

Within twenty minutes, the whole group of Nate’s family, Nate, and I were en route to a local bar. Michaela was a karaoke lover and had found a bar nearby that offered karaoke on Saturday nights. At the bar, we pushed some tables together and everyone started ordering beers by the pitcher. Not having any money at the time, Nate relied on the kindness of his uncle to supply him with a limitless amount of beer. I watched Nate down three beers soon after we arrived at the bar, so I was careful to sip on one beer for most of the night, knowing that I would have to drive us home. This arrangement was perfect for Nate because that meant that he got to take every birthday shot that someone bought me.

“I want to make a toast,” his uncle said, raising his near empty beer glass. “To Stefanie. My nephew needs someone to keep him in line. Happy birthday!” He drained his beer and sat down to pour another glass. Everyone clinked glasses and laughed. Nate winked at me from across the table before refilling his own glass.

“I know! There’s no way I’d let my brother move in with me without Stefanie,” Michaela said. The whole table laughed. I looked over at Nate to see how he’d take her joke, but to my surprise, he was laughing too.

“Stefanie’s good people. Don’t let her go, Nate,” Alex said. I was surprised by Alex’s kind words. I always admired her wit and level-headedness when it came to dealing with Nate’s temper or any negativity in her life, but I wasn’t sure that she ever liked me. She was smart and I feared that she saw me as weak, but I would quickly erase that thought because I figured that nobody knew what was really going on in my private life with Nate. She didn’t know about the fights Nate and I had, so how could she judge me for it? Alex was a strong woman in every sense of the word and I wanted to be more like her. Looking back, Nate must’ve realized this desire of mine because he made sure to fill my head with ideas that Alex might not like me.

“Alex is cool. You try too hard to be cool around her, Stef. She can see it and it doesn’t work. I think it annoys her, actually,” he told me. This trick to make me feel more isolated—that nobody liked me—worked with more than one of my friends.

“Annie always told me that she liked just hanging out with me and Christopher. But then you came back around. I think she liked it just being the three of us,” he said.

“Yeah, I know y’all were close. But I’ve been close to Annie for years,” I said.

“Well, based on what she said, maybe you think y’all were closer than you really were.” He didn’t elaborate, so I pushed.

“What do you mean? What did she say?” He scoffed and brushed off my questions.

“Nothing. I’m just sayin’—maybe the people that you think are your friends aren’t as great as you think they are.” Conversations like this made me constantly question if I was too overbearing or too annoying or too clingy with my friends and maybe they didn’t really like

having me around. Throughout my life, friends and boyfriends I had dropped off my radar completely, never to speak to me again. I learned later that this appeared to be the nature of immature girls and guys that were too juvenile to tell me when things just weren't working out, but when Nate questioned my choice in friends and what they thought of me, it was easy for me to believe him.

More people added to the conversation, all lightheartedly giving Nate a little ribbing. His eyes were starting to get a little glassy, but he still laughed at everything that was being said. Occasionally, he would wink at me from across the table or kiss me on the forehead when he would leave the table to get another beer or go step outside to smoke. It felt good to be around so much love. I smiled and laughed at all the appropriate times that people should when they're being talked about as if they're not in the room, thankful that I had a new family who loved me and wanted to show me a good time on my birthday and that wasn't going to argue with each other. Thankful that they could serve as a buffer between Nate and me. I loved Nate's family—I felt like they had the relationship that my family used to have, back before we moved to Texas. They always said "I love you" to each other before someone left the house to just to run down to the gas station to buy a pack of cigarettes. I could feel the love at my own parents' house, but it wasn't something that we ever verbally expressed in my family. We didn't hug each other all the time like Nate's family did. We didn't throw elaborate parties or barbecues on a cousin's birthday. We enjoyed each other's company, but it was contained to our living room where we'd all watch football together on Sunday nights. We talked about what our days were like and when work or school was frustrating and when a really good thing or a really terrible thing happened, but we never talked about how we felt for each other. I hadn't heard or said "I love you" to

anyone but Nate in months. Nate's family was all about sharing love with each other and making sure everyone felt it.

"No, but Nate's gotten better. He's responsible now. Well, probably because of Stefanie, but still—he's doing okay," Kelsey said. Nate smiled at her kind words and winked at me from across the table. Sometimes he made me feel like the only person in the room—like I was the only person who was important. I smiled. Soon after the conversation became several smaller conversations between pairs of people around the table, Michaela came to tell me that it was our turn for karaoke. I didn't know what song she had picked for us, but I started walking to the stage with her. We passed a group of young, college-age men playing pool together. One of the men smiled up at me just before taking a shot. I blushed and looked away. Suddenly, I felt my arm being squeezed and jerked back. My neck popped as I stumbled backward towards whatever was pulling me.

"What the fuck was that?" Nate was inches from my face, his warm, sour breath filling the short space between us. I thought he saw the exchange between the pool player and me and I knew I would have to pay for it, but he never hit or pushed me in public. This was a first. Before I could feign ignorance as to what he was talking about, the pool-playing guys swarmed us and I was pushed out of the crowd.

For the first time, a small part of me was happy that it looked like Nate was going to get the same treatment that he routinely gave me. No less than five or six men encircled Nate, isolating him from anyone willing to rescue him from whatever was about to happen. I didn't want him to get beat up too badly—just maybe something that would make him realize that it hurts. Something that would make him realize that it must hurt me when he treated me that way. I wasn't stupid—I knew that he was aware he caused me pain, but I hoped that feeling some

physical pain of his own might wake something up in him that would make him stop. Maybe he'd change his ways and find other outlets for his anger, like taking up a hobby or joining a gym. I knew he didn't want to hurt me—I saw it when he would hang his head, unable to look at me after a particularly bad fight—and that knowledge was the only thing that kept me hopeful that he would eventually stop.

I stood a few feet from the group as the men got in his face, asking him “Are you a woman beater? Why don't you hit me?” I watched and waited. The men were careful not to touch Nate, I'm assuming because touching crosses that invisible line of what's okay and what will start a fist fight. Instead, they stood inches from his face, spitting words at him in the same way he spit them at me. My heart rate sped up. I couldn't look away. I was stuck between wanting him to be taught a lesson for the way he treated me and wanting to leave with Nate and pretend this night never happened. I knew that it was already too late for me to avoid a fight. Even looking in another man's direction was criminal to Nate. The end of a pool cue rubbed against Nate's cheek, leaving a blue streak just under his left eye. I wondered if he was embarrassed, but at the time, I didn't care whether he was or not—a new feeling for me.

“I guess it's time for us to go,” Nate's uncle said. I was so caught up in watching Nate try to get out of his predicament that I hadn't noticed Nate's uncle standing beside me. He had been watching the spectacle for a few moments, too, before he pushed his way through the crowd and grabbed Nate. Kelsey put her arm around me and escorted me towards the door.

“C'mon. We're going for late night breakfast. Michaela and Alex are already on their way to the restaurant.”

“Sounds good,” I said. I hoped that being around Nate's family would diffuse the anger that I knew was coming, giving Nate time to forget all about the guy smiling at me and nearly

causing a small riot in the bar. His family had a way of making him nearly docile in public.

When I was alone with him, that's when the anger couldn't be contained. I knew I had to do whatever I could to not be alone with Nate in this moment. I had to give him time to calm down as much as possible.

Nate busted open the front door of the bar and came spilling out onto the sidewalk behind us. Everyone else from our group was already in their cars as if they were used to someone spoiling the fun and having to make a quick exit. It all seemed so perfectly orchestrated to me. Kelsey left my side and jogged ahead to walk with her husband across the parking lot. Nate took Kelsey's place beside me, my elbow firmly locked in his grip.

"What the fuck was that?" His voice was low so that only I could hear him.

"What the fuck was what?"

"Everyone takes a turn making fun of me and you don't stop them?" I felt like I was exhaling for the first time all night. He missed the smile from the pool player. He was angry about the ribbing from his family. I thought this situation might be easier for me to handle than the thought of me getting the attention of another man, so I switched gears quickly.

"They were just kidding! They love you."

"Nice. My own girlfriend can't stand up for me. I don't know why I put up with you." He released me with a shove just before we got to my car; he walked around to the driver's side.

"Nate, I'll drive," I said, trying to sound as helpful as possible. He didn't even look up before opening the door and sliding into the front seat. I opened the passenger door, but stood next to the car.

"C'mon. I don't want you to get pulled over." *Or die in a car accident, I thought, or kill me in one.* Sure he was angry, but I couldn't bear the thought of the man I loved getting hurt just

a little while after a celebration in my honor. I rationalized that he had wanted me to have a good time on my birthday, which is why he left the house earlier after our argument. He wanted to calm himself down so he wouldn't ruin a day that was supposed to be special. In the same way that I rationalized staying with him because of his mental illness and because of my love for his family and because of the love made me feel when he was happy, I rationalized away his anger. All of this was my fault. He wouldn't have been angry with me if I could have just stepped in earlier and said that he was a great boyfriend or that he made me happy or that he made me feel loved. All I had to say was *one little thing* and I could have avoided his rage, but I didn't. I was angry with myself for not being a better girlfriend—for not having the decency to defend his honor. He stared out the front windshield of the car, gripping the steering wheel. Said nothing.

“Please, let me drive. I know you're not drunk, but still—if a cop pulls you over, I don't want you to get in trouble,” I pleaded. It was also not in my best interest to say anything that might doubt Nate's ability to do anything, especially suggesting that he couldn't handle his liquor enough to drive us home, which meant that I thought he was less of a man. Still, he said nothing and stared straight ahead. “Please?” I tried one more time. His jaw flexed.

*“Get. In.”*

I obeyed.

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Here is the moment that you now wish you would've told him to fuck off. Here is the moment that you pin-point in your head as the start of the most horrific night of your life. In your dreams, you go back to this moment and you tell him to get the fuck out of the car and never contact you again.

But that's not what happened. You wanted to avoid the fight, so you did what you were told. What little shred of self-worth you felt at that moment would be wiped away for a very long time after that moment—after that night.



## Fourteen

Before we even left the parking lot, he started screaming at me.

“Didn’t we have this conversation earlier? How you can’t say anything nice about me? Were you *trying* to prove my point?”

“No, I’m sorry. They were just kidding,” I said. Nothing was coming to my brain to tell me how to diffuse his anger. I was too busy watching the road, making sure that Nate was staying between the lines and ready to grab the wheel if we started to veer. I couldn’t throw all of my concentration into the fight we were having, so I was losing faster than I normally would.

“It doesn’t fucking matter that they were kidding. You still couldn’t say anything nice about me. You just don’t even give a shit about me at all.” He kept looking over at me, waiting for me to face him, but I couldn’t take my eyes off the road as he sped over to the restaurant only a few miles away.

“See? You can’t even fucking defend yourself because you know I’m right.” Nate ran through a stop sign. I gasped, but thankfully, there were no cars around.

“What? You’re worried that I’m gonna fucking kill us?” He turned the steering wheel back and forth so that we were weaving all over the road, pushing us over the double yellow lines to the opposite side of the road, watching my reaction the whole time. There were still no cars around us, but my stomach was in my throat wondering when a car was going to come around the bend ahead of us.

“Nate, please. Stop.” He slammed on the brakes, sending us both jolting forward. The car came to a complete stop in the middle of the road.

“Nate—“

“What? You told me to stop.”

“You know what I meant.” The car stayed in the middle of the road. “Nate, please,” I pleaded.

“Oh, is it okay if I go now?” I looked away—out the passenger window—and wiped a tear. “Well, is it?”

“Yes,” I whispered. The screeching tires kicked up smoke as the car lurched forward from the stand-still.

Nate was still shouting at me when we pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant, parking the car between Michaela’s car and his uncle’s car. I started to undo my seatbelt, but Nate was relentless.

“Tell me, Stefanie. What the fuck am I supposed to do? I’ve got a girlfriend here who doesn’t give a shit about me.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Of course I care about you. I love you.” For the first time, he was silent. I reached across the stick-shift and rested my hand on Nate’s leg. He turned in his seat to face me, propping his knee on the center console. “I’m so sorry,” I repeated. He slapped his hand on the left side of my face with such force that my head hit the window.

“You’re not fucking sorry.” I started digging through my purse in search of a tissue, trying to keep myself busy so that I wouldn’t start sobbing hysterically. With Nate being as angry as he was in the moment, I knew it would only fuel the fire.

“Are you gonna stop crying so we can go inside?” he shouted. I nodded.

“Just go in without me. I’ll be inside in a second.” I thought I might have to reapply some makeup in case there was a mark on my face and I wanted to calm down so that the puffiness around my eyes would go down. I didn’t want anyone to ask what was going on. I knew that

anything that would draw attention to Nate would be something I would pay for later, even if I lied to cover it up.

“I’m not going in without you. They’ll know something’s up. Don’t be stupid.” Just then, my cell phone rang. Nate looked at the screen—Michaela’s name flashed across it. He answered the phone.

“Hey! We just got here,” he said. His tone had completely shifted; he sounded cheerful. I couldn’t believe how easily he switched from angry, screaming Nate to happy, joke-cracking Nate. I could handle his episodes, but the sudden anger was different. I didn’t know how to navigate between the two and it was exhausting. I wanted it to be over, but I wasn’t sure what that meant. Did I want him out of my life? Did I just want to get out of the car? Did I want to just go to bed? I couldn’t focus or decide—I just needed everything to stop.

He stared ahead out the front windshield and smiled. “Yeah, we’re coming in a second...yeah. Oh, y’know, I had to make out with my girlfriend a little bit in the car. We need some privacy, man!” He laughed. While he was on the phone, I tried to stop crying so that we could go inside, but my face throbbed and I felt defeated—I didn’t know what to do to make him stop being so angry. The tears just kept coming. Nate hung up the phone and I started to hyperventilate.

“Oh, Jesus Christ. You’re not gonna stop, are you?” he said. He started up the car again and slammed the gear shift in reverse. “Fuck it, we’ll go home. Way to ruin my night in absolutely every way possible.”

I tried to apologize, but nothing came out—just sobs. I thought that apologizing would get him to calm down. Leaving the parking lot, Nate ran up on the curb and clipped what I think might’ve been a utility box. I knew I had to calm down so that I could watch the road. Nate’s

anger mixed with all the alcohol he had would make for a terrifying ride home. Nate turned down a back road that served as a short cut to Michaela's house from the highway, which normally I would've been okay with, but the road wasn't lit, trees jutted up from deep irrigation trenches on both sides of the one lane road, and sharp turns and steep curves more than suggested that cars drive slowly on this stretch of unpaved road. Nate sped down the road, gesturing wildly with his right hand, looking over at me instead of the road.

"Please slow down," I begged. The back of the car dipped as the rear passenger side slid towards the trench. Nate shifted the gears higher and kept going faster.

"Don't try to change the subject," he shouted. "You only care about yourself and I do everything for you. I fucking take you out on your birthday, organize a whole night for you, and you haven't even said thank you. And then when my family starts to shit-talk me and make fun of me—no, I don't care if they were kidding!—you stood by. Hell, you might as well have thrown me under the bus, too." The car swerved and Nate grabbed the wheel with both hands, fighting to keep the car on the road on a sharp curve. I screamed.

"Shut the fuck up. It's under control. God, you make me sick sometimes." The car swerved, pushing the front left tire off the road. Nate regained control and shifted the gears higher again. We were in fifth gear, flying down a dark road that cars were only meant to go thirty miles an hour on, tops.

"Nate, please. Just slow down. Please." His stone-faced expression let me know that he wasn't interested in anything I had to say. I gripped the edge of the seat below me and concentrated on trying not to throw up. The throbbing in my cheek was replaced by numbness and my heart was racing. I was in the middle of another anxiety attack, but I knew that if I got

myself worked up enough to the point I was vomiting, which happened more often than not once the attacks became frequent, I might send Nate further into a rage that I wouldn't be able to stop.

When we finally got to the house, Nate threw open the bedroom door and kicked off his shoes. While I was digging around in the dresser for my pajamas, Nate grabbed my wrist.

"Are you really not going to say anything to me now?"

"I'm sorry for tonight. I don't know what else to say," I said.

"Unbelievable." He launched into more reasons why I was a terrible girlfriend, but I was fighting exhaustion from our near constant arguing throughout that day. I had taken off my shirt and was in the middle of hanging it back in the closet when Nate wrapped his arm around my neck—my chin resting on the crook of his elbow—and wrapped his other arm around my waist, pulling me towards the bed in the corner of the room. I just wanted everything I was seeing, hearing, feeling—to end. Just stop. I wanted to be home. I wanted to be anywhere but there.

"Are you even *listening* to me?" He threw me back onto the bed with a force I had never experienced with him. My elbow cracked the plaster on the wall and I screamed out. I clutched my left elbow with my other hand and turned towards the wall, trying to quiet my sobs. Nate climbed up the edge of the bed and crawled over me, stopping to straddle me at my hips. He grabbed my chin and turned my face up to face him.

"Look at me," he said. It was dark, but the window behind him allowed me to make out his silhouette. His shoulders heaved. "I just want you to love me like I love you." His fingers dug into my cheek. With his free hand, he undid the button and unzipped my jeans.

"This is all I want," he said, sliding his hand into my underwear.

His voice was gruff and even though I had heard him yell at me hundreds of times before, this tone was different. In the dark, I couldn't recognize him.

“Stop.” My voice cracked. I was hoarse from the crying and shouting and trying to get him to slow down and trying to get him to listen to me. I was defeated. He pulled down my underwear with jeans, freeing one of my legs—the other leg stayed tangled in the clothes and sheets. I was still clutching my elbow, which was growing hot with pain. “Stop.”

I lifted my hand and pressed it against Nate’s chest, pushing him away. He grabbed my free hand and pushed it down onto the mattress, holding it there. His right hand shifted, pushing my face against the wall. A shock of pain started at my pelvis and tore up my insides, stopping in my chest where my heart was thumping so loud I could’ve sworn Nate could hear it over his panting. Every time Nate pumped hard against me, my cheek bone knocked against the wall and tiny blue stars appeared in my left eye. The weight of Nate’s arm pressed my face hard into the wall. My nose burned and the wall was slick with my tears.

“I just—” he panted, “want you—to love me.”

In that moment, I thought about my family. How sad my Papi would be that instead of being out celebrating with my friends or at home with my family or getting ready for bed, excited about the events my birthday would bring the next day, I was physically trapped in a situation that I never thought I would be in. I wanted to be in the kitchen, mixing up a batch of cupcakes for my sisters while they sat and watched and offered to “clean” the mixing spoon, which was common when I baked for the family. I wanted to be in the living room with my mom, animatedly discussing a soccer game we were watching together. I wanted to be with my Papi, talking about a book he was reading at my recommendation and analyzing its chapters. I wanted to be anywhere but on that bed at that very moment.

“You’re not even moving,” Nate said, breaking into my thoughts. He stopped pumping and leaned over me, his face inches from mine. “You fucking ruined it.”

And just like that, he was off of me and out in the garage, smoking a cigarette. My whole body throbbed with a dull but constant ache. My brain felt cloudy, like I couldn't concentrate on anything and I couldn't comprehend anything. My left eye felt hot and the bone underneath it would be a pale shade of blue the next day—something I would explain away to my parents as an accidental run-in with a toy guitar during a drunken game of guitar hero. I rolled onto my side to face the wall and a sharp pain shot up my arm. I held my elbow with my other hand and stared ahead in the darkness, feeling my breath closing the space between my face and the wall, until I eventually fell asleep.

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After that night, you barely thought of yourself as a person. You were empty. When he yelled, you didn't argue back. You didn't apologize. You didn't even speak. You just stared straight ahead and waited for it to be over.

You didn't feel worthy of anything—not love, not hate, not anger, not happiness. Nothing. You felt responsible for what happened to you. If only you had gotten out sooner. If only you had fought harder. If only you hadn't gotten in the car. If only you didn't go out for your birthday.

You only thought about how much you missed your family and how you weren't sure you could ever go back to them. They'd see the shame on your face and you would have to tell them that you disappointed them. You became a statistic.

And the worst part was, you stayed. You weren't sure if you could safely get away from him. You knew that leaving him meant leaving Michaela and Alex, who became two of the people you loved like your own family. Again, you weighed the good with the bad and the bad was starting to win.

It would be years before you thought *If only he hadn't made the decision to rape me.*



## Fifteen

After that night, I was unresponsive to anything he said or did. There was nothing left in me to fight with him. He had won. Nate's life immediately changed as dramatically as mine had, but in a much different way. Michaela and Alex kicked him out because they suspected he was doing drugs again. She told me that a few of the kids that had come over to play with her son one day had gone out in the backyard. One of them accidentally threw the ball over the fence into that field behind the house and when she went to retrieve it, she found a bunch of empty prescription bottles—her bottles. Every kind of painkiller from her medicine cabinet had been emptied, from her son's children's Tylenol to Vicoden.

After Michaela had told me about her discovery, I started thinking more about the changes in Nate's behavior recently. His mood swings had become even more intense and sudden. I thought he might be doing drugs again, too, so Michaela instructed me on what to look for. If Nate was doing drugs, I didn't want to deal with him anymore. I could tell myself that I was helping him or he needed me when he was sober, but him getting into meth was a decision that made the lines between his illness and his choices sharper than ever.

Once my suspicions were confirmed after accidentally coming across a stash of crystal meth in his sock drawer, I knew I had to get out of the relationship. I knew that his only option after Michaela's house was to go to his grandmother's. There wasn't room at her house for me to always be there with him, which I relieved by. I could use this as my out.

I didn't want to give away that I knew what he was up to, but when I tried to get away from him, using any excuse I could think of, he made it so that he had to come with me. I needed a moment away from him to think about what to do next. I wanted time to think before I made a decision that would undoubtedly bring us both pain, though my pain would likely take on

various forms. Still, I wasn't allowed any time away from him, so when he sensed that I was becoming distant, he started accusing my family and me of being involved in the very same drug world that he was wrapped up in. I was becoming increasingly annoyed. I wasn't sure if his paranoia was because of his illness or because maybe he was doing drugs again. I was angry with myself for not knowing the signs. For blindly trusting him. For not knowing the difference in drug use and mental illness. I felt stupid. Maybe it was because I hadn't had time to sort out my thoughts or to come up with a plan of how I could successfully end things with him, but while getting back into my car with him in a grocery store parking lot, I snapped.

"How *dare* you," I screamed. "Just stop, right now. You know my family isn't involved in anything. I *saw* what you were hiding in your sock drawer, so don't even try to put anything like that on us."

Nate's eyes were wide. I had never stood up to him like this. I might've defended myself at times, but I was careful about how I went about it. I knew—in this moment—that this was my out. I didn't know that I wanted out of the relationship before, but I knew I needed to get out. This was different. I wanted nothing to do with Nate anymore. He was doing drugs again and he was accusing my family of being wrapped up in it, too. I couldn't take it anymore.

"Stop, you're making a scene," he said, scurrying towards the car.

"Don't you fucking tell me to stop." I was still shouting; people staring. Nate was almost whispering, like he was scared of me. I had never felt that kind of power before and I decided that I didn't want to give it up.

"If you guys aren't in the dope business, too, why would you be so defensive right now? C'mon now," he said, slamming the car door.

"I'm defensive because I'm sick of putting up with your crazy," I shouted.

For a second, I wished I could take back that word—“crazy”—because I never thought Nate was crazy. I saw him as sick. But with how controlling he was and his need to use whatever force to intimidate me—in that moment, I couldn’t think of a better word. I’m still not sure I can. When he made the decision to resort to meth, I lost all hope and all sympathy for him. It became clear to me that he was capable of choosing how he wanted to live his life and he was deciding that self-medicating or recreational drug use or whatever label he wanted to put on what he was doing was the way he wanted to keep living.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. You didn’t see anything in my sock drawer ever.”

He was still rambling about my father being in “the game” and he knew that I was just a pawn in it all. I sped to his grandmother’s house to say goodbye to him forever and continued to ignore what he was saying until his insults turned to my father and my family, then I shouted back. When we arrived at his grandmother’s, he wouldn’t get out of the car.

“I’m done. Get out,” I said, staring ahead. I wouldn’t look at him. I had never felt so sure about wanting to just get the hell away from him, but I worried that if I looked at him and he started to cry, I would give in.

“What? You’re just mad that I figured you out? That I figured out your family’s just as much in this shit as we are?” he said, gesturing towards his grandmother’s house.

*“Shut. Up.”*

“At least admit it,” he said. He let out a short laugh. “I mean, I did. Fine, you saw it in my drawer. I’m not denying that.”

“Are you fucking high right now?” I genuinely had no idea. Michaela told me that his paranoia was worse when he was doing meth again. I kept asking myself *Is this worse than normal?* I wasn’t sure. He ignored the question.

“And you still can’t admit that you’re fucking your old boyfriend again, you bitch.”

I grabbed the closest thing to me—an empty Gatorade bottle—and threw it at his face. He put his arm up and it hit deflected and hit the window. When I first met Nate, I went on a rant about how much I detested that word—*bitch*. He had called me every name imaginable, but never that one. When he put his arm down, he looked at me and laughed.

“You’re fucking crazy,” he said.

This time, my jaw was flexing in anger.

“Get the fuck out of my car. Get out. Get out.” I kept repeating my demand while he ignored it and hurled insults. “I do not want to be with you anymore. This is over.”

“You’re just gonna end it? Not even talk about it?” he asked. His tone suddenly changed and tears started to form in the corners of his eyes. I looked away. I couldn’t feel sorry for him anymore. He didn’t need my help. He decided to help himself.

“We’re past talking about it.”

“After all I’ve done for you, you’re just gonna leave me?” I thought about screaming *All you’ve done for me? Like giving me bruises I hid from my family? Like putting marks on my body that I lied about to everyone? Like taking all my money? Like using my car all the time? Like searching through my cell phone and running up the bill doing who knows what? Like making me hate the person I’ve become?* But I said nothing. I just nodded. *Yes, I’m just gonna leave you.*

“But I love you, Stefanie. Don’t you see that?”

Silence.

“Please don’t do this, baby.”

Silence. Sobbing.

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Don’t do this.”

Silence.

“I’ll stop. I’ll change. I’ll get back on my medication.”

“I sincerely hope you do,” I said. I meant it. He was beyond my help. “You need help that I can’t give you.” My voice was calm, even.

“What? You think I fucking need help? Like I’m some kind of crazy person? You’re the one who needs help,” he said. In just a moment, he went from crying and begging me to stay with him to spewing his venom at me, a behavior change that I was all too familiar with.

“Please, just get out of the car. We’ll talk about this when I get out of class tomorrow. I have to finish my paper.” I was trying to say anything that would get him out so I could go home.

“You don’t think that this is more important than your fucking homework?”

“Please, just go.” He didn’t budge. I remembered that he still had a bunch of his clothes in the trunk of my car that we had taken from Michaela’s house when she booted him out. I popped the trunk open and got out of the car; I started tossing clothes on the ground into a pile behind the car next to me. Nate flew out of the passenger seat and slammed the trunk down on my fingertips. I would lose all my fingernails later. I screamed. He pulled me into a hug.

“Baby, I’m so sorry.” I shoved him away with my elbow.

“Get off of me!” I ran to the driver’s seat, still sobbing, and reached across to the passenger door to lock it. Too late. Nate was sliding back into the seat. It didn’t occur to me to call the police. To alert any neighbors. To even drive to the police station and lay on the horn, as

my therapist would later suggest for that situation. I was used to dealing with Nate on my own—I didn't think at the time that I was the one who needed help leaving.

"Please, get out. Leave me alone," I said between sobs. He leaned over the center console and grabbed my face. He covered my mouth with his, trying to kiss me. I squirmed and shook my head, finally freeing myself. "Stop it. Get out."

"I love you, Stefanie. Don't do this."

Silence.

"Fine, I'll just tell your family what a slut you are."

Silence.

We stayed in my car until sunrise. He would cry and I would feel sorry for him—for the sick man—but he would change just as quickly and tell me what a crazy bitch I was or how my family was full of drug dealers. He would tell me that none of my friends were really my friends—that I would have nowhere to go if I left him. I finally rationalized that even if that were true, having nowhere to go was better than being with him.

As the sun came up, I begged him to get out so I could go to school. I didn't finish my essay and I had to get to class to hopefully work something out with my teacher. I don't know how it eventually happened, but he got out of the car. I went home to get my backpack and change clothes, no time to shower. My parents were awake, making coffee and reading the newspaper. They looked up, puzzled as to what I was doing coming in so early as I usually left Nate's house and went straight to school. I was sure I looked like hell. I spent all night fighting and crying. My fingers still throbbed and blood had started to pool under some of my fingernails, but I hid my hands and didn't say anything to them as I headed back to my bedroom to get my bag, but the looks on their faces made me realize that I needed to say something. While in my

bedroom, I sent my professor an email, the same woman who I admired since I met her the first day of the semester. I loved her class and I was disappointed in myself that I would have to ask for the first—and last—extension on an assignment.

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You knew that you'd have to explain to your professor what happened. You knew it would be something you'd have to explain to everyone who ever met Nate as your boyfriend. As you sat in front of the computer screen, you thought about how you'd phrase it: *I was in a bad situation*. No. *I broke up with my boyfriend*. No. *My boyfriend used to hurt me, but I got out of it today*. No. You knew you had to label it with exactly what it was: abuse.

You were relieved that you could call it something.

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*Dear Professor Taylor, it said. I need to ask for an extension on my paper. I'm sorry that I've waited until the morning that it's due to do this, but I didn't expect it to happen this way. I am in an abusive relationship. I've never said that to anyone. I mean, I was in an abusive relationship. I left him after a long night of fighting, which kept me from getting my work done. If you can't grant me the extension, I completely understand, but my success in this class means a lot to me and I figured it was worth a shot to just ask. Thank you for your consideration.*

I walked back out into the living room.

"I, uh—I broke up with Nate." My hand was on the doorknob to leave.

"Oh! That's too bad," my mom said. Nate had charmed my family, so I knew this would be a surprise to them.

"Yeah. Uh—he's, uh—he's crazy," I said. "Like, *crazy*." My mom's eyes went wide. My dad froze, his cup of coffee almost at his lips. He put the mug down.

“Mija, are you okay? Are you safe?” he asked. I nodded.

“Yes, but he might come over here. He says he’s going to tell you about how I’m such a slut and how crazy I am. I’m not sure if he’ll come, but there’s a chance. Don’t talk to him. Don’t let him in.” My mom’s eyes gleamed.

“I hope he *does* come over here. I’ll show him crazy.” I laughed a short, exhausted laugh.

“I didn’t finish my essay,” I said, starting to cry. “I have to talk to my teacher. I hope she’s not mad at me.”

“Well, if she doesn’t let you turn it in late, it’s not the end of the world,” my mom said. “It’ll be okay.”

With that, I said goodbye and left the house. My mom telling me that it would be okay was taking my first breath after breaking the surface from a deep sea dive. Every part of my body ached as I drove to school. I arrived incredibly early to class and sat in the empty classroom. I felt like I was going to throw up as I waited for my professor. She was kind, but firm—I wasn’t sure if she would believe me and have mercy. After a few minutes, she came into the classroom, smiled at me, and sat down at the desk in the front of the room. I had been rehearsing what I was going to say for the last twenty minutes—“Did you get my email? If I can’t have an extension, it’s okay. Can I turn it in late for a deduction?” But she spoke first.

“Are you okay, dear?” I couldn’t answer. Too ashamed to look at her, I put my head down on the desk. I sobbed into my sweatshirt. She crossed the room and put her hands on my shoulders. I saw her macaroni bracelet out of the corner of my eye.

“C’mon, stand up,” she said. She threw her arm around my heaving shoulders and escorted me downstairs to the crisis counselor. Part of me was scared that things weren’t over with Nate. I knew what he was capable of when he was angry. How would he be if he was



backed into a corner and unable to argue his way out of me breaking up with him? But a bigger part of me was relieved that it was all over and that I could finally breathe.

## Sixteen

Your first day in the therapist's office, you cried for nearly the entire ninety minute session and you're not sure you can stop. But you did. Your therapist first if you were safe. Professor Taylor mentioned the abuse when she brought you into the office. You could only nod and look at the ground to try to hid your shame. He saw your fingernails and told you that he needed to know if he should call campus security to escort you to your classes. You couldn't answer because you don't know. You knew Nate was capable of awful, scary things, but you still weren't sure if he'd actually follow you to school and if he might be angry enough to hurt you or do one of those awful, scary things to you with so many students and professors around. You just weren't sure. The doctor made the call to security.

The doctor told you that under no circumstances should you have any contact with Nate for at least the next seventy-two hours. He said that seventy-two hours was the danger zone. People get desperate in break-ups, he said. They'll do anything to try to get you back or make sure nobody else can have you. When you wouldn't look up at the therapist, he cleared his throat.

You have to hear me, he said. Really hear me.

You wiped your nose with the soggy Kleenex in your hand and looked straight at the doctor. He leaned forward and stared back at you over the top of his tortoise shell glasses.

He might kill you if you go back.

Your insides froze. You cried harder because you knew the therapist was right and because you wanted him to be wrong.

The doctor told you that Nate will try to make you believe he is the victim. He told you that Nate will try to guilt you into taking him back. He told you not to answer your phone when

he calls—let a friend hold your phone for the next few days, change your phone number, turn your phone on silent. Just don't speak to him.

When you left the doctor's office, you looked at your phone. Sixty-seven missed calls.

## Seventeen

You want to say that you're not embarrassed anymore that somehow—though the lines are blurred, you know how it happened—in the course of your life, you became the battered woman. You didn't know exactly what steps you took to get there, but you just realized one day you were. You let it define you. Maybe you were in the middle of reading a book or maybe you were arranging shelves in your new apartment, states away from your old life, or maybe it was over a quiet dinner with a good friend.

You know that you shouldn't be embarrassed. You were a victim and if you could reset your life, you would cut that part out of it without question. People tell you that you're a survivor. You learned that it wasn't your job to help everyone who needed it—sometimes the person you needed to help most was yourself.

You have heard all the platitudes. Sometimes you even repeat them. But you really want to roll your eyes. Move along.

You still get angry to the point of tears at times when you think about what you went through. You think about how you could have stopped it, but your mind was different then. You hear the term “brainwashed” and that's the closest you can get to describing what it was like. Once, you said it was like being under a spell, but spells made you think of Disney fairytales and what happened to you was no fairytale.

The thing you feel more than anything when you think back to your past life is shame. You pride yourself on being strong, determined—sometimes fearless—and you think about how easily all of that was stripped away from you and for what you thought was love. You can barely live inside your own head at times when you really think about it.

But you are embarrassed. You want to forget that old you, but you know that's dangerous. If you forget, you worry that it will happen again. You think about your future daughters and when you'll tell them this story. You'll want to tell them how you got out and stayed out. You'll want to tell them how happy you are now. You'll want to tell them that you know for certain that you *will not* go through that again. You know the signs. You'll teach them. You don't let it define you anymore. Maybe you won't carry the shame anymore by then. Maybe it will just be a small thorn embedded deep in your memory that you think back on occasionally. So you think about it some days; you rehearse the story like you're memorizing for a test. You won't fail this time and you'll make sure that they won't either.

## Epilogue

I was with Nate for approximately seven months. Looking back, it seems like we fell for each other very quickly and I fell into a bad situation just as quickly. I am lucky that I wasn't in the relationship for very long. I know that some women suffer for much longer—years, decades—in relationships that are far worse than the one I was in. If I didn't have people who loved me as much as they did, I might not have realized so quickly that I needed to get out of my relationship and I might not have had the strength to stay out.

Nate continued to stalk me long after I ended the relationship with him. Sometimes I would be eating dinner with friends and I would notice that he was out in the parking lot, watching. Sometimes I would go out for a run, I'd turn a corner, and there he was riding alongside me in a friend's car. I changed my phone number more times than I can count, but he seemed to have connections everywhere, including an employee who worked for the same phone service provider who would freely give Nate my phone number. I was eventually granted a temporary restraining order, but that didn't stop Nate from following me and harassing me for years after things ended between us.

I knew that as I wrote this, some people would relate to my pain. Others might feel the overwhelming urge to apologize to me for what I endured at someone else's hand. I understand that.

I knew that as I wrote this, some people would think that I am just another dumb, weak girl that allowed myself to be manipulated by an opportunist—I let it happen. At times, I think that myself. Some people would not feel sorry for me. They would tell me that I learned my lesson or I earned my treatment. I understand that.

I know that, if he were to read this, he might disagree. Perhaps none of it was his intent. Perhaps it was. Perhaps he will believe that my emotions and my story aren't justified. Maybe he sees himself as the victim and feels justified in that notion, and if that is the case, I disagree with his justification

I wanted people to read this. To erase what they think they know about what it means to be in an "abusive relationship," and instead to see what it's like to be held prisoner by your own fear. To know what it's like to be held prisoner by guilt. To know what it's like to be held prisoner by shame. To know what it's like to be held prisoner by mental illness. To know what it's like to be held prisoner by your own mind. To know what it means to lose yourself so completely that you don't even recognize yourself. To not know how to find your way back, but to do it anyway. To learn. To understand.

I didn't write this story as my therapy. I went to therapy for my therapy. I didn't write this story to hurt anyone, though I suspect it will. I don't like that this story will do that.

I wrote this because this was the story that every single time I sat down to write, my fingers—poised intently above my keyboard, nearly vibrating in anticipation—relentlessly asked my brain *Is this the time we tell it?* This is the story I had to write because it was bursting out of me with a force I could no longer contain.