

Sleeplessly Sincere

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Sleeplessly Sincere

by [hopefulminty](#)

Summary

“I have something here. A note. A, uh, letter. Um.” She cleared her throat and slipped into her best poetry recital voice. “I wish that everything was different. I wish that I was part of something. I wish that anything I said mattered to anyone. I mean, face it, would anybody even notice if I disappeared tomorrow?”

Alana’s breath escaped in a huff. “Well, that’s a mood. Not mine. I mean, the words aren’t mine, but I know what it’s like. And I bet you all do too.”

Her voice was small.

The room was quiet.

And still. So still.

It was like she was whispering into the void.

She closed her eyes. “I’m here. I’m listening. Our lines are open.”

Notes

Meg Ryan strikes again.

Meg Ryan being my fan fic muse for a musical I’ve never seen live is actually a pretty good example of the kind of randomness my brain produces.

This story has been inspired by *Sleepless in Seattle* and is marked as Gen because it will be following that movie’s trajectory.

Rated T for swearing and because the usual sensitive topics (including suicide and anxiety) will be touched on.

Alana

“And that right there was the sweet, sweet sound of our very own Lindsay Mason. Coming up next a classic little jingle by Ron Peters and the Peterettes. You may recognize it from that toothpaste commercial when we were kids. The one with the talking dog. I don’t know about you, but my dentist used to give us a sticker with that dog on it if we didn’t have any cavities. Good times. So, sit back, let your mind rewind, and don’t forget to breathe.”

Alana didn’t have time to breathe. She didn’t have time to duck or move or shield herself from the pen cap that was sailing her way.

It bounced off her forehead and landed on the floor with a soft ping.

Just as Alan had known it would.

He hadn’t actually intended to hurt her; of that she was certain. Her brother was not prone to violent behavior.

Not even when his patience was gone and he was rapidly approaching a ten on the annoyance scale.

“Lanie,” Alan moaned.

Alana attempted to choke back a laugh. She was semi-successful.

Sort of.

She only held it together for a second before the laughter spilled out of her again. She shielded her face with her hands. “I’m sorry, but that voice!”

“It’s my radio voice!”

She lowered her hands when she heard Alan’s smile. “Where does that even come from?”

Alan pointed at the mic. “You think you can do better?”

Alana ignored the question. She dug through her bag until her hand landed on the book she’d brought. “Here. Don’t say I never do anything for you.”

“I would never!” Alan’s mouth dropped open like he’d been offended to his very core.

“You’re the backbone of our family, our town, our society as a-”

He jumped off the counter and flew back into his seat, only to spin around and sigh. “False alarm. Some of these pieces are so short I...”

The song ended.

Alan did his thing.

Alana got through it without cracking up.

The next song was jazzier. Alan snapped his fingers and swayed to the beat. “What do you think?”

“Of your voice?” Alana wrinkled her nose. “I thought we’d established that.”

“The show.” Alan puffed himself up. “My show.”

“It’s, uh...” Alana didn’t know what to say. She didn’t know anything about jazz. She didn’t think her brother knew anything about jazz. She didn’t know what he was doing in a booth at the campus radio station when he should be in his room studying.

He was pre-med, for goodness’ sake.

She wondered if he was experiencing a mental break of some kind. Or an early quarterlife crisis.

“You hate it.”

Alana snapped to attention. “I don’t hate it! I just... I know you wanted to do something fun this year, but-”

“This is fun!” Alan gestured around the booth.

Alana tried her hardest not to show how much she wasn’t buying that. The station was dark and dingy and smelled like there was mold growing in all the vents.

She wondered if that explained all this. There were mold spores invading her brother’s brain. Mold spores were making him long to become a DJ for a jazz program with content of a questionable quality that aired in what was basically the middle of the night.

She didn’t bother stifling her yawn.

Alan gave her a look. “It’s after ten.”

“I know,” Alana yawned. It was past her bedtime.

“You want to sleep over?”

“Can’t.” Alana smothered her third yawn. “First day of school.”

Alan’s whole face lit up. He smacked his forehead. “Oh, right! Senior Year! The countdown is on! Look out world, here comes, Alana Beck!”

Alana smiled a smile she didn’t feel. She closed her eyes and tried to hear what her brother was hearing.

The song wasn’t bad. Much better than the previous ones. It was almost catchy.

She snapped her fingers twice before she realized what she was doing.

Alan had the decency not to look smug. “We have a good music program here. There’s a lot of emphasis on composing. I-”

The song ended before Alan could finish that thought. He muttered something into the mic. Murmured.

Like he was trying to sound sexy.

Alana snorted so loudly she wondered if the audience heard.

Alan gave her a look. An exasperated one that time. “People listen to this station to relax. I have to sound soothing.”

“Is that what that was?” Alana raised an eyebrow.

“And if Melinda Carlisle happens to be listening, well...” Alan did a little dance.

Alana rolled her eyes and smothered another yawn.

“Are you okay to drive?”

Serious Alan had entered the chat, which meant the situation was serious.

Alana did a quick self-check. She was tired, but not to the point where she felt like she was moments away from passing out.

It was a twenty-minute drive. Fifteen if she got all the green lights.

She could be home and in bed by 11:30, asleep by 12. She would only need two cups of coffee to function normally.

Three if one of the twins wet the bed. Again. For the fourth night in a row.

She shook her head and then nodded.

“That was convincing,” Alan snorted. “Let me see if Glen’s around. He can finish the show.”

Alana put up a hand to stop him. “I’m fine, really.”

Alan didn’t look convinced.

Alana put on her perkiest smile. “If you drive me, I’ll have to get a ride with Alicia tomorrow and I’ll-”

“You’ll be late,” Alan finished with her. “Text me when you get in.”

Alana promised she would.

“I mean it. The second you’re in, you-” Alan cleared his throat. “Our next song tonight was part of the Senior Showcase a few years ago. It’s by an artist named...”

Alana didn't catch the name.

She didn't hear the song.

She switched the station when she got in her car because there was at least an eighty percent chance whatever her brother was playing would put her right to sleep.

Alana took off her shoes before she entered the house. She crept across the floor, taking extra care to avoid the squeaky floorboard by the couch and the landmine of toys that belonged to the twins or the dog or both.

She listened for the sound of footsteps, for one of her parents to ask where she'd been.

Nothing.

They were asleep. The whole house was asleep.

They probably assumed she was too.

She sighed when she was safely tucked away in the basement.

She sent Alan a quick text. *Home.*

She received a thumbs up in response.

She threw her bag down and got ready for bed and climbed under the covers in what felt like record time.

It didn't matter. In the grand scheme of things, it didn't matter.

Her brain woke up the second her head hit the pillow.

She grabbed her phone to distract herself. She scrolled through her texts. Her family. Her fellow interns. Gina, that girl she'd gotten stuck with on that one English project who had probably changed her number just to avoid Alana's wrath.

Tracy.

Alana closed the texts and stared blankly at her home screen.

Tracy was at the bottom of the list. She was next to last. She was one spot above Gina. That was how long it had been since they'd been in touch.

It wasn't Tracy's fault. Alana knew that. She was pretty sure it was her turn to respond.

Scratch that.

She was positive it was her turn to respond. Tracy had reached out more than her fair share of times.

It was just that she'd been so busy all summer with the internship and the college classes and Gran that...

She thought about sending Tracy a text.

A quick one.

A simple one.

Her mind went blank.

It was after midnight.

Tracy had been asleep for hours.

And she never remembered to keep her phone on silent.

Alana put down her phone. She stared at the ceiling.

The floor shook above her. Or so it seemed.

The door to the basement flew open. Alana tilted her head back to look at her sister Alice.

"Oh, God, there's poop this time!" Alice threw a bundle of sheets down the stairs. They only made it halfway. "Do me a favor and throw those in before you leave tomorrow!"

The door slammed shut.

Alana rolled over and turned the radio on.

Alan's show was over. It had been replaced by something that sounded like a drowning yodeler.

She turned it right off.

She woke up before her alarm.

An hour before her alarm.

That was the absolute worst way it could go. A half hour early made her feel like she had extra time to get ready. Two hours meant she could get more sleep.

There was no point in rolling over when she was an hour early. It would take her twenty minutes to fall back to sleep and then she'd be all groggy when her alarm went off.

Not how she wanted to start her first day. Definitely not how she wanted to start her first day.

She sat up and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes.

The house was quiet.

She felt a flash of excitement when she realized how quiet it was.

She decided to savor the calm before the storm.

She got ready as fast as she could and tiptoe-sprinted up the stairs. She only made it halfway. She grabbed the railing and swung around just before her foot landed on the twins' sheets.

On one of the twins' sheets. There was only one set in the bundle. She realized that when she did the dutiful thing and threw it in the wash.

That meant one of the twins had made it through the night without having an accident.

That was progress. Alana hadn't experienced a laundry-free morning since Alice and the kids had moved back in.

It had been a long week.

A long week in a long summer.

A long summer in a long year.

A busy year. More busy than long.

And it was about to get a lot busier.

Alana knew she should enjoy the quiet. She should sit at the counter and play on her phone and make the coffee the way she wanted it made.

Moments like this didn't come along very often.

She should take the time to relax. To sit back and do nothing. To let her mind...

Her eyes landed on the landmine of toys and that was it.

She got to work.

She left before her family came downstairs.

She left a downstairs that was as neat as she could get it. One that would be destroyed as soon as the twins woke up.

She called up the stairs that she was leaving.

No one responded, not even the dog.

She checked her phone once she was parked.

Three new texts.

Her heart skipped a beat. That was a lot, considering the hour.

Her mother told her to have a good day and made her promise to pose for a first day of school picture when she got home.

Alicia accused her of stealing her pink scarf. Alana told her to check with the twins.

Alice wanted to know if she could babysit after school.

Alana said no, that she had a student council meeting.

She only felt a small twinge of guilt when she said it. It wasn't a lie. Not completely.

There was a student council meeting after school.

It was just that Alana wasn't on the student council.

Not officially.

Not yet.

She'd made the excuse knowing that Alice would never call her on it, that Alice was too absorbed in her own life to keep track of things like her sister's extracurriculars.

Especially since student council sounded like something Alana would be on.

And if Alana had any say in it, she would be.

She just had to have a quick word with Ms. Barnes about the role she'd created and she'd be all set.

She was sure of it.

The senior hallway was so crowded Alana checked the time. And then she checked it again.

She triple-checked it to be sure.

She was early. She wasn't even close to being late. She had plenty of time to find her locker and unpack before she even had to think about going to homeroom.

She made her way down the hall, smiling and saying hi to as many people as she could. Some of them said hi back.

Most of them didn't.

She tried not to take it personally.

It was a new day, a new year, a new start.

People were excited to see their friends. She couldn't blame them. She would've felt the same if...

She pushed that thought down. Stomped on it. Buried it as deep as she could.

She redirected her energy towards the classmate on her left.

And away she went.

The morning was a blur of introductions and syllabi and technical difficulties.

Typical first day stuff.

It was comforting in a way.

Falling back into her routine was comforting. Switching her brain onto autopilot was comforting.

Homeroom, English, Calculus, Lunch.

At which point her autopilot clicked off. She needed her wits about her while navigating the halls.

There were people everywhere. She wove through the crowd, swapped out her books, and nearly took out an eye.

She cringed apologetically. "Tracy!"

Tracy smiled like she hadn't noticed how close she'd come to being blinded by a backpack. "Caught you!"

"Yeah, you did," Alana chuckled. She shut her locker and cleared her throat.

Nothing came out.

Her mind went blank.

"I stopped by the other day."

That was news to Alana. "You did?"

Tracy nodded. "I was running an errand for my mom and I had to pee and your house was right there, so..." She shrugged. "Alicia let me in."

"Oh. I wasn't there."

“I noticed.”

“What day was it? If it was Wednesday, I was probably at the senior center. If it was Thursday, I was-”

“I don’t remember.” Tracy bit her lip. “Thursday, I think.”

Alana nodded solemnly. “I was at my internship. The city council one.” She tapped her chin. “Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“Right,” Tracy muttered. She exhaled so deeply her bangs puffed out. “Alicia told me about the invasion.”

Alana tilted her head.

“Alice and the twins,” Tracy clarified. “Alicia said you’d been exiled to the basement because Alice finally wised up and left her baby daddy.”

Alana wrinkled her nose and not just because those words sounded weird coming out of Tracy’s mouth. “They stole my room.”

Tracy stared at her for a beat. “You gave it to them, didn’t you?”

Alana simply shrugged.

“Did you move your stars yet? Maybe I can come over after school and...” Tracy’s voice trailed off.

Alana turned to see what she was looking at.

John Rickard.

Was he the John Tracy had mentioned in her last text?

The one Alana had been ignoring for weeks.

Her phone found its way into her hand before she realized what was happening.

Tracy snatched it from her and examined the case. She jabbed a finger at the scratch on the left side. “So, you didn’t get a new phone then?”

Alana blinked like she didn’t understand.

“I thought maybe you’d gotten a new phone and your contacts hadn’t transferred and...” Tracy sighed. She waved at someone behind Alana.

John.

Alana didn’t have to look to know she was waving at John.

John sidled up to them and wrapped an arm around Tracy's shoulders. "Hey." He nodded at Alana. "Hey. How was your summer?"

"Good," Alana monotoned. She caught herself and forced a smile. "How was yours?"

"Great." John pecked at Tracy's cheek. "We had a great time camp counseling."

Tracy giggled like he'd said something hilarious.

John nodded at the stairs. "You ready?"

Tracy nodded. She raised her eyebrows at Alana. "You coming?"

It took Alana a second to wrap her mind around that.

Lunch. Tracy was talking about lunch. Lunch with John. Lunch with John and his friends, most likely.

Alana shook her head. "I have to find Ms. Barnes and-"

Tracy snorted. "Alana has had a working lunch every day since we were twelve."

Alana narrowed her eyes. "I have not."

"Thirteen, then." Tracy stuck out her tongue. She glanced at John. "Are they serving nachos today? I'm having a serious nacho craving."

John stretched his arms like Superman. "Let's go find this girl some nachos!"

Tracy giggled and did the same.

Alana leaned down to tie her shoe.

She didn't watch them go.

She caught up with Ms. Barnes outside the teachers' lounge.

It was a lucky catch. Lucky for her. Ms. Barnes didn't seem thrilled about the ambush.

Alana pretended not to notice that.

She made her case. She explained how it would be a good idea for the student council to have a historian. A record keeper. Someone who could offer input by putting it in a historical context.

She used her best PowerPoint presentation voice and wondered, not for the first time, if she should've included a visual aid.

Ms. Barnes cleared her throat while Alana was in mid-sentence.

Alana swallowed sharply. She knew that look. It had never been directed at her, but she knew what it meant.

If this was a class presentation, she'd be lucky to scrape by with a C.

She scratched the back of her neck. "So, uh, yeah, it's just a thought. You know. Something we can--"

"We already have a secretary, Alana."

Ms. Barnes's tone was gentler than her words.

Which made them worse somehow. Alana took a breath. A sharp breath. It cut through her chest.

She heard a voice in the back of her head. Alicia's voice.

She closed her eyes and wondered if it would be worth it to take a page from her sister's book. To point out that Lola Hernandez could barely write her own name, let alone the council minutes.

And everyone knew she'd only won because she was popular. Popular adjacent. People knew her name. She'd been the only recognizable secretarial candidate on the ballot.

Alana hadn't been on the ballot. She'd thought about it, dreamed about it, come up with all sorts of ideas and plans.

She'd chickened out at the last second.

It was for the best.

She didn't think she could've handled losing the presidency to Nick Nelson, a run-of-the-mill semi-charismatic golden boy who, rumor had it, had convinced Lola to become secretary so they could create a sex scandal, the likes of which their school had never seen.

If she had truly been channeling Alicia, Alana would've blurted that out in front of Ms. Barnes, but she wasn't, so she kept her mouth shut.

She lowered her head and mumbled something that was almost a thank you and went on her way.

She spent the rest of her lunch period in the bathroom, nibbling on a cereal bar and studying her schedule.

She lingered by her locker after the last bell rang.

She wasn't sure why.

Habit, probably.

She usually had a reason to hang back after the herd had made a run for it.

It was weird having nothing to do. Almost nothing. She had homework. Two assignments that would take her all of thirty minutes.

She almost texted Alice that she could watch the twins after all.

Almost.

She stopped herself just in time.

She weighed her options. Library or home. Home or library.

Or she could really break bad and get a milkshake before dinner.

So many possibilities.

It was a good thing she wasn't on the student council. She didn't know where she'd find the time.

A chill ran through her. A sharp, painful, icy chill that made her stomach twist and her head spin.

The library. Definitely the library. Home meant quiet and chaos and the twins.

She scrolled through her phone while she walked. Sibling Chat had exploded during her last class.

Alicia was still looking for her scarf. Alice was still looking for someone to watch the twins. Alan was trying to remember the name of the restaurant with the pirate ship out front.

Ahoy, Mateys Alana replied. She'd barely hit send when her phone started to ring.

"Is that the one with the seaweed burger?"

"Yeah." Alana wrinkled her nose. "Don't tell me you're craving one of those."

"Some of the guys were talking about going there this weekend and I told them to steer clear. I thought that was the place." Alan crunched into the phone and hiccup-burped. "Sorry. I'm trying to eat and run. I have class in ten minutes."

"So, you do still go to class! And here I was starting to think you'd given up on that and embraced being a..." Alana came to a stop. Her eyes followed the sound of laughter.

There was a poster-making session going on in the breezeway. A group of girls were sprawled on the floor painting and tossing glitter in the air.

Tracy was in the middle.

Alana nearly dropped her phone.

She didn't know which part of that was stranger – the part where Tracy was making spirit posters with a bunch of cheerleaders or the part where Tracy didn't ask her best friend to join them.

“Lanie?”

Alan's voice centered her. She put her phone back to her ear. “Yeah?”

There was a pause. Alana could picture the way Alan was frowning at his phone.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” Alana breathed. “Steer clear of Ahoy, Mateys. Dad got food poisoning last time.”

“Yeah,” Alan laughed. “So, I'm hosting an exciting show tonight. You should stop by.”

Alana barely registered the invitation. She knew it was a pity one. An excuse to get out of the house for a bit.

Alan knew what she was up against. They were cut from the same cloth. Two peas in a pod. Her home life had been seriously lacking since he'd started college.

She murmured something that she knew Alan would take as a refusal to commit either way. Which it was.

Her eyes darted back over to the breezeway. There was a giggling, shrieking, glitter/construction paper war happening over there. The combination of sunlight and sparkles made it look almost magical.

Her fingers squeezed her phone. She wondered what would happen if she texted Tracy, if she asked if she still wanted to come over and help her put stars on the basement ceiling. She wondered if Tracy would ignore the text or jump up in embarrassment or tell her to come make posters instead.

She stopped wondering because she'd never know. She wasn't going to text Tracy. That was a thing that wasn't happening.

“Lanie?”

“Yeah?”

“Long day?”

Alana yawned into the phone. “Tired.”

“Hey, now. Don't come down here with that attitude. We're having a party in the studio tonight!”

Alana pulled her phone back and stared at it.

“I’m not being mind-controlled by aliens.”

“I didn’t say you were!”

“Your face said it.”

“You can’t see my face.”

Alan chuckled. “Maybe not in actuality, but in my mind’s eye...”

“So, when you say party, do you mean like a party-party or an Alan party with two losers playing chess in the corner?”

Alan let his breath out in an indignant huff. “Okay, so not a party, per se. Craig’s been doing some updates around the studio this week and he thinks the phones are working now. I can take requests!”

Alana covered her mouth to muffle her laughter. She didn’t have to see her brother to know his indignation had grown. “So, the two people who listen to your show can tell you what commercial jingle they want to hear next?”

“Exactly. It’s gonna be off the chain!” Alan paused like he’d just heard himself. “I can’t pull that off, can I?”

“Not even a little bit.”

“Still. Offer stands. Swing by if you... Oh, shoot, Lanie, I gotta run.”

Alana didn’t get a chance to say goodbye before the call ended. She glanced at the breezeway one more time before moving on. She lingered a moment to see if Tracy would look up.

She didn’t.

Which was fine.

Alana had enough to do without having to worry about getting glue out of her hair.

Alana didn’t realize how fast she’d been walking until she crashed into something.

Make that someone.

She yelped out an apology. Her eyes went wide when she saw who it was.

Ms. Ross.

She’d run right into her guidance counselor. It was a sitcom moment. Ms. Ross did a weird, vaguely rain dance-esque flail as she tried to regain her balance.

She managed to grab the wall before she fell.

The stack of papers she'd been carrying wasn't so lucky.

Alana sprang into action. She scooped up as many as she could before she realized it was a lost cause. A semi-lost cause. Half the papers were wet.

Apparently, her sitcom-level clumsiness wasn't the only culprit. A recently mopped floor was also to blame.

Ms. Ross side-eyed the papers that had landed in that mess.

Alana couldn't blame her. A wet floor this early in this part of the school could only mean one thing.

Someone had thrown up.

It just wouldn't be the first day of school without it.

Alana dumped the contaminated papers in the custodian's trashcan and tried to avoid looking inside.

Ms. Ross checked her watch. "This is what I get for trying to be efficient." She gave Alana an apologetic smile when she realized she'd said that out loud. "I'm having a weird day. Are you having a weird day?"

Alana nodded.

Ms. Ross's smile widened. "I have to give a freshman assembly first thing tomorrow and since my piece of crap of a car only feels like starting half the time now, I thought I'd get a jump on setting up before I leave today."

Alana didn't bother masking her surprise at Ms. Ross's use of the word 'crap.'

Ms. Ross didn't seem to notice. She was that kind of a teacher.

Which was just one of the reasons Alana had always liked her.

"I can help," Alana offered. "I can, uh..."

Ms. Ross nodded at the contaminated papers. "Can you run off some more of those?"

Alana nodded eagerly. "Sure."

"Great," Ms. Ross beamed. "Two hundred should do it. I'll be in the auditorium setting up. Let me just..." She jotted something down on a slip of paper and handed it to Alana. "That's my code for the copier."

Ms. Ross's mouth twitched with amusement. "I think I can trust you not to plaster the school with pictures of your butt."

“Not my butt. Someone else’s, maybe.”

Alana blinked twice when she heard herself. She was discussing butts – other people’s butts – with a teacher. With someone whose input could determine which colleges she got into.

She wished, not for the first time, that her life came with a rewind button.

She took a breath.

The problem was that Ms. Ross always reminded her of her grandmother. A younger version of her grandmother. A much younger version of her grandmother. She felt the need to clarify that in case Ms. Ross could read minds.

It wouldn’t surprise her if that was the case. Ms. Ross always had a knack for getting to the heart of the issue. Alana had been to her office at least a dozen times and Ms. Ross always knew what to say to make her feel better, more organized, like the world wouldn’t end if she didn’t ace her biology final.

Just like her grandmother did. Had. Never would again.

A lump started forming in her throat. Because she’d thought about her grandmother, most likely.

Or because it had been a day.

She willed herself not to cry. She plastered a smile on her face and forced herself to breathe. “That’s not what I... Weird day.”

“Very weird,” Ms. Ross agreed.

And it just kept getting weirder.

Ms. Ross froze in the middle of the hallway. In mid-sentence. Suddenly. For no apparent reason.

It took Alana a second to notice because she’d only been half-listening while Ms. Ross chattered on about how close she’d come to being late for the first day of school and how much trouble she’d be in if her piece of crap of a car decided to act up again.

And then it stopped.

The chatter.

Ms. Ross froze. Her eyes zeroed in on something down the hall.

There was a flash of movement, followed immediately by a bang.

Alana's heart-brain-everything raced until she realized the bang had been a door slamming, not a gunshot.

Ms. Ross continued to stare.

It was enough to make Alana feel like there was something she'd missed.

Ms. Ross smiled tightly, like someone was forcing her to do it. "Excuse me."

She took off down the hall.

Alana swallowed the urge to tell her to watch out for mop water.

Because Ms. Ross didn't need that warning. She wasn't the one experiencing sitcom-levels of clumsiness.

Alana, on the other hand...

She turned around and walked right into Evan Hansen.

Or he walked into her.

It was hard to tell.

He was probably to blame though, given the speed he'd been moving at. She'd barely managed a step before they collided.

She rebounded backwards into a table. The impact from that was almost as bad as the collision. She let out a strangled cry. "Ow!"

Evan made a sound that got lost in his throat. He took a breath and tried again. "Sorry!"

Alana put one hand on her forehead, the other on her back. She craned her neck to see if he was being chased.

He wasn't.

She tilted her head.

Evan wasn't looking at her. He wasn't looking at anything in particular. His eyes were wild, his arms were swinging, he looked like he was half a second away from taking off again.

She pitied whoever was around the next corner.

"Did you see..."

His mouth snapped shut.

Liftoff was imminent.

Alana massaged her neck. "Are you okay?"

Evan's eyes focused on her for the first time since they'd collided. "What?"

"Are you okay?"

Evan looked himself over like he wasn't sure.

Alana pointed at his cast. "Is your arm... Did I hit it when we--"

"No," Evan interrupted. Sharply. Like he didn't have time for her or her questions.

Alana pursed her lips. "So, you're okay then?"

"In general or..."

Alana's eyes widened.

It was obvious his words had surprised them both.

"No," Evan huffed.

And that was that.

He took off again.

A bit slower that time.

Alana nodded to herself.

That was fair.

She didn't need to hear anything else.

Because when you got down to it, was anyone ever really okay?

The copier was impossibly slow.

So slow that Alana wondered if the school should raise money for a new one.

She could do it. A bake sale, maybe. Or a car wash. Or something.

Something better.

She could think of something better than that.

She drummed her fingers on the lid and checked what number it was on.

58.

Almost 150 copies to go.

She watched three more papers fly out.

The copier wasn't that slow, really.

She was just that bored. And restless. And ready to go home.

There was something about being in an empty computer lab that made it feel later than it really was.

She was suddenly so, so, so, incredibly tired.

She grabbed one of the copies and sat down. She smiled when she read it. It was refreshing in a way. It was good to see some things never changed.

Ms. Ross's freshman assembly never did.

Choices

It was always about making good choices.

How one choice – good or bad, big or small – could change things. Everything. A life.

The butterfly effect.

Ms. Ross was obsessed.

There would be packs of ninth graders giggling and flapping their wings all afternoon.

Alana had been one of them, once upon a time. She remembered discussing the assembly with Tracy. She remembered wondering how her day would've gone if she'd brought grape juice instead of orange.

It had been a joke then.

It didn't feel like a joke now.

If...

Alana started thinking about the ifs in her life. The many, many ifs.

What if she'd gone straight home after school?

She wouldn't feel like there was a lump sprouting out of her head.

What if she'd agreed to watch the twins?

She would be even more exhausted than she already was.

What if she'd texted Tracy?

She pushed that thought away.

She pushed the rest of them away too. The hard ones, the serious ones, the ones that had been bouncing around her head for years.

Those thoughts could wait until later, much later, when she was trying to fall asleep.

She sighed and checked the copier.

127.

She leaned back in the chair and spun around twice. Three times. Four.

She gripped the edge of the desk before she made herself sick.

Her hand bumped the mouse and a document popped up.

She didn't mean to read it.

She didn't consciously choose to read it.

It just happened.

Dear Evan Hansen...

She chose to hit print.

The house was empty when she got home.

No twins, no Alicia, even Sally was gone.

That one worried her until she remembered her mom saying something about getting Sally groomed.

She dropped her things on the counter and checked the time.

Too early for dinner, too late for a snack.

She had a banana anyway.

Her homework took even less time than she'd expected. She tried to enjoy that, to bask in the last few drops of summer.

She could watch tv or read a book or fall into a Wikipedia spiral.

The possibilities were endless.

She thought about starting dinner, but she wasn't in the mood.

She thought about making the first day of school picture a first day of school selfie, but the thought of that made her sad.

It wasn't the same.

It didn't feel right without her mother fussing over her hair and smoothing her skirt.

She decided to do it anyway.

To get it over with.

Because otherwise it wouldn't get done.

Her mother had left the felt board out for her.

ALANA – GRADE 12

She held it up and set the timer.

Big smiles, everyone!

She sent it to her family.

The response was instantaneous. It was adorable! Precious! Would be better if she'd worn her hair up!

Her father was going to print it for the wall.

Alana ran her finger along the wall. She studied the pictures all the way from **ALICE – PRE-K** to **ALICIA – GRADE 12** and **ALANA – GRADE 11**.

There was room for one more.

The twins would have to use another wall.

She stopped in front of the last picture they'd all taken together.

ALICE – GRADE 12

ALAN – GRADE 10

ALICIA – GRADE 8

ALANA – GRADE 7

She looked at their faces. Happy, laughing, big smiles all around.

The first day of school picture had always been an event.

An annoying, embarrassing, why-are-we-doing-this event but an event nonetheless.

Something twisted in her gut.

Maybe she should've waited. Maybe there wouldn't have been chaos before dinner or after or during.

Maybe her smile would've been genuine.

Her phone buzzed.

Alan.

I ordered Chinese.

Alana didn't bother responding.

She just grabbed her things and left.

Alana made a show of sniffing the room when she walked in. She smelled the air. She smelled the couch. She tried to smell Alan until he shooed her away.

She grinned and flopped onto the beanbag chair.

She made a show of sniffing that too.

Alan lowered his headphones when he finished his intro. An annoyingly upbeat song filled the booth. "We cleaned."

Alana pretended to do a white glove test. "It smells like you doused the place with Lysol."

Alan nodded like they had. "What do you think?"

"You should've gone with the beachy scent."

Alan shook his head. "The song. It's my first request!"

Alana paused to listen. Really listen.

It was just as annoying as she'd originally believed.

She wasn't about to say that out loud. She wasn't about to comment on the kind of people listening to her brother's show either.

She helped herself to an egg roll and took a big bite.

Alan didn't notice. He'd moved on.

She followed his eyes to see what was making him smile like that.

There was a girl standing in the hall. Hovering. Pretending to check her phone. She kept sneaking glances in Alan's direction.

Alana quirked an eyebrow at her brother.

He swatted her arm as he passed. "Melinda Carlisle."

She should've guessed.

She rolled her eyes to express her abandonment issues.

Alan didn't notice. There was a real bounce in his step when he stepped into the hall.

Alana watched them through the window until the sight of it made her squirm.

She leaned forward to steal the carton Alan had left behind. She took a bite of something salty and brown and possibly chicken.

She fidgeted with her bag and decided to review her history notes while she waited.

She didn't get very far. One sentence. A half of a sentence.

She drew a cluster of stars.

She drowned in the silence. The sudden silence.

The song was over.

She leaned backwards to get Alan's attention.

He was nowhere to be seen.

The air was dead.

The door flew open. A guy ran inside. His eyes were wild. His hands were wilder. His mouth opened and closed several times when he spotted Alana.

He gestured at the microphone and mouthed the words "do something."

Or "say something."

Alana wasn't sure. She didn't think it mattered. His intentions were clear.

He expected her to take the mic.

He took off again. To find her brother, she hoped.

Alana gave it a minute. A partial minute. It felt like an hour.

She stood up and perched on the edge of Alan's chair. She put his headphones on and pushed the glowing button.

“Hello?”

Her voice sounded weird. So very weird.

She cleared her throat. “Uh... hi. So, we’re experiencing some technical difficulties over here at...”

Her mind went blank. What was the station called?

She had no idea.

She coughed into the mic. “Our request lines are wide open though, so call us up and...”

She had no idea how to find a song. Or make it play. Or do anything to satisfy Alan’s listeners.

All three of them.

She wondered if there were more than three. She wondered if Melinda Carlisle was a sign that her brother had groupies.

The thought made her sick.

She exhaled deeply. It came out as a sigh or possibly a yawn. “Sorry... I... I’m tired and...”

Did her voice always sound like that?

The echo made it sound weird, but how weird was it really making it? There had to be some truth there.

“What should we talk about while we wait for Alan to return?” She struggled to keep her voice light. She scooped her notebook off the floor. Her eyes landed on the stars.

She had a feeling Alan’s groupies did not want to hear her regurgitate her notes about the separation of powers.

She didn’t know what they wanted.

What would people who tuned in to hear jazz/commercial jingles/her brother’s ridiculous radio voice want from her?

She dropped her notebook. It slipped right out of her hands.

A paper fell out.

Dear Evan Hansen...

She didn’t remember sticking it in there. She barely remembered sticking it in her bag at all.

She didn’t know why she had.

Because it spoke to her. Parts of it spoke to her. Parts of it went straight to her core.

She had a feeling it would speak to the groupies too.

At least she hoped it would.

“I have something here. A note. A, uh, letter. Um.” She cleared her throat and slipped into her best poetry recital voice. “I wish that everything was different. I wish that I was part of something. I wish that anything I said mattered to anyone. I mean, face it, would anybody even notice if I disappeared tomorrow?”

Alana’s breath escaped in a huff. “Well, that’s a mood. Not mine. I mean, the words aren’t mine, but I know what it’s like. And I bet you all do too.”

Her voice was small.

The room was quiet.

And still. So still.

It was like she was whispering into the void.

She closed her eyes. “I’m here. I’m listening. Our lines are open.”

The lines didn’t go crazy.

She hadn’t really expected them to. She didn’t know what she’d been expecting at all.

In a moment of panic, she somehow managed to make the last song Alan had played play again.

It was peppy in a disorienting way the second time around.

A message popped up on Alan’s monitor.

Someone with the username MayDay2311 wanted to know if she was okay.

She didn’t respond. Because she didn’t know how. She didn’t know the answer. And she wasn’t really sure how she’d transmit it if she did.

There were too many buttons and her brain couldn’t process them and talk at the same time.

Because she had to talk. When the song was over, she’d have to say something to reassure her audience.

The messages that kept popping up made that clear.

People were concerned. They thought she was having a breakdown of some kind.

It was heartwarming to see so many strangers express their concerns. And a bit embarrassing.

It was a good thing she hadn't identified herself.

And that her parents never listened to Alan's show.

She closed her eyes and took a breath. She looked at the letter again.

Dear Evan Hansen...

It couldn't be a coincidence. Her collision with Evan couldn't be a coincidence.

She didn't know much about Evan. They'd had a few classes together over the years and that was it.

He was quiet. Kept to himself, as far as she could tell. A pretty terrible public speaker.

He wasn't the type to sprint around their school for no good reason.

It all came down to the letter.

She wondered who had written it.

She was dying to know who had written it.

Jared Kleinman. That was the only name she came up with, the only person she had ever seen Evan talk to outside of class.

She couldn't picture Jared writing something like that though, not unless he possessed layers she'd never seen.

She had her doubts.

Alan burst back into the booth just as the song was winding down. He squeezed himself onto the chair with Alana.

"Are you okay?"

She stared at him in horror. She wondered if he knew they were live. Her hand hovered above the glowing button next to the mic but she couldn't bring herself to smash it down.

Alan put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm serious, Lanie. What was that?" He snatched the letter out of her hands. His hands shook as he traced the last few lines. "I wish that anything I said mattered to anyone. I mean, face it, would anybody even notice if I disappeared tomorrow?"

Alan turned to face her straight on.

There was so much concern there it made Alana sick.

"It's not mine!" She made a feeble attempt at snatching the letter back. "I didn't write it!"

Alan's eyes darted up to the top. He was just noticing the greeting.

Alana moved to cover it because that was too much. She didn't want Alan to blurt out Evan's name on the air.

Or Zoe's.

Which Zoe?

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Alana knew that was a clue. There were only a handful of Zoes at her school.

She shook her head. She didn't have time for that.

She needed to distract her brother before he said something she'd regret.

The phone flashed to indicate they had a call.

That worked.

It took her three tries to answer. Alan looked amused by her ineptitude but did nothing to help.

She stuck her tongue out at him when she finally hit the right sequence of buttons. "Hello! You're on with-"

"What the fuck?"

Alan dove forward to disconnect the call.

Alana swung the chair around to throw him off balance. "What-"

"What the actual fuck was that?" the caller snapped.

Years of practice made it easy for Alana to defend the phone from her brother. "You mean-"

"Is this a fucking game to you people? You think this shit is funny? You think this is a fucking-"

"Connor? Are you-"

The line went dead.

Alana blinked at the phone.

Alan dove forward again. He cued up a song without saying a word.

He shook his head at her when it started to play. She heard him mumbling something about language and violations and fines.

She didn't care about any of that.

Connor.

The girl in the background had said the name Connor.

Connor.

Zoe.

Connor Murphy had a sister named Zoe. Or possibly Chloe.

No, she was fairly certain it was Zoe.

There was no way that was a coincidence.

Alan didn't put up a fight when she grabbed the letter that time.

She read it again. She tried to imagine Connor Murphy writing it.

She couldn't imagine Connor Murphy writing it. Not the Connor she knew.

Not that she knew him that well.

They'd had a few classes together, worked on a project or two, spent a semester as lab partners.

The Connor she knew was a sarcastic stoner who didn't seem to spend a lot of time introspecting.

She didn't think she'd ever seen him so much as look at Evan Hansen.

It was weird. The whole thing was one big, weird mystery.

She couldn't wait to solve it.

Zoe

“You don’t want to rewatch *Glee*. You just want to listen to the music. Save your sanity and go on YouTube like a normal person.”

Jenny’s eyes widened like she was having an epiphany. “Thank you! I bow down to your wisdom, o’ wise one.”

And then she bowed.

She literally bowed to Maya.

The two of them giggled.

Nicole giggled too. She elbowed Zoe when she didn’t join in. “Zo-zo?”

Zoe blinked at her friends. She tilted her head back to check the clock.

She hadn’t missed the bell.

She’d just missed whatever her friends were giggling about. She struggled to play it back in her head. “Are we doing a *Glee* rewatch?”

“No,” Jenny grinned. “Maya stopped that madness.”

Nicole rolled her eyes. “Thank God.”

Her smirk faded when Zoe didn’t return it.

Zoe made a show of yawning.

“Late night?” Nicole winced sympathetically.

Zoe nodded and smothered another yawn.

The bell rang.

Nicole and Jenny went left, Zoe and Maya went right.

That was a relief. Jenny was still babbling about *Glee* and Nicole kept glancing at Zoe like she knew something was wrong.

Which it was, so that was fair.

Zoe didn’t feel like talking about it though.

Maya got that.

She dug through her bag and didn’t say a word.

It was the last bit of peace Zoe got until lunch and even that was just a moment. A blip. A momentary blip of peace.

She was engulfed by her friends' conversation before she'd even processed their arrival.

"-but maybe it'll be better the third time around."

"Third?" Nicole choked on a bit of her sandwich. "You're telling me you've watched *Glee* twice already?"

"And you think it's magically going to get better?" Maya jabbed a fry in Jenny's direction. "And less problematic?"

"Not magically, no," Jenny grumbled. "But maybe-"

The sound of Zoe's chair scraping across the floor brought the conversation to a stop.

Zoe very pointedly avoided her friends' eyes. "I'll see you guys later."

Nicole grabbed her arm. "You barely touched your lunch."

That was an understatement.

She hadn't touched it at all.

She sat back down.

She didn't want to sit back down. She wanted to go. Where? She wasn't sure. Somewhere. The bathroom or the band room or that one hallway that always smelled faintly of cheese.

The cheesy breezeway was her best bet if she needed a second to breathe.

Nicole studied her like she had an equation written across her forehead. "What's with you today?"

Zoe took a bite of her apple. A big bite. She opened her mouth so Nicole could see her chew. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

"I don't, actually. That's why I asked."

Nicole narrowed her eyes.

Maya poked at her fries.

Jenny looked like she was seriously weighing the pros and cons of bringing up *Glee* again.

Zoe closed her eyes and deflated a bit. She leaned back so Nicole wasn't so in her face. "Okay, yeah, sorry. I know I'm being a bit... I don't function right when I don't get enough sleep."

Jenny dropped her fork. Her eyes darted around the table. "Is there a test I don't know about?"

"It's the second day of school," Maya reminded her.

"I know, but-"

"I wasn't studying," Zoe hissed in a tone that did nothing to calm Jenny's nerves.

"Were you watching Netflix?" Maya asked. She grinned when Zoe didn't respond. "Reading a book? A magazine? A Wikipedia article about Medieval torture devices?"

Maya tapped her chin and pretended to frown. "Hmm. Let's see. What else could you have been doing that kept you up all night?"

Zoe narrowed her eyes. That only egged Maya on more.

"I know! Were you in your bed, tossing and turning alone or..." Maya wiggled her eyebrows, "...with someone?"

"With who?" Zoe snorted. "Jim Bob, my imaginary boyfriend?"

"He has a name now?" Maya nodded approvingly. "Progress."

"Was it Connor again?"

Zoe whipped around to glare at Nicole.

Nicole pretended to study her nails. "I'll take that as a yes."

"What about Connor?"

"Were you helping Connor study for a test?"

Zoe ignored Maya and Jenny. She focused on her hands as they clenched and unclenched in front of her. She focused on her breathing. She ignored the look Nicole was giving her. The pleading, pathetic, slightly apologetic look.

Nicole knew better.

She knew better than to bring that up. To bring him up. To bring any of it up.

Nicole cleared her throat. "It's just a question." She gestured at their friends. "I mean, we all know he-"

Zoe pushed away from the table again.

Her friends didn't try to stop her that time.

She wouldn't have stopped if they had.

Her friends didn't come to her locker after the last bell rang.

They didn't go to Nicole's either. She glanced down the hall, but it was too crowded for her to see if they were gathering at Maya's or Jenny's.

She didn't care enough to go out of her way to check.

It was a relief in a way. And also, really not.

She'd have to send an apology text later. Or a meme. A random, vaguely funny, animal-based meme would do the trick.

She closed her locker and straightened her bag and nearly jumped out of her skin because there was someone in front of her.

Right in front of her.

Apparently, Alana Beck did not understand the concept of personal space.

"Hi!" Alana chirped.

Zoe rubbed her forehead. She was way too tired to deal with whatever activity Alana was recruiting people for.

Because that was what Alana Beck did.

Zoe didn't know her well. She knew the name. She knew the face. She knew to run when Alana was holding a clipboard.

There weren't any clipboards in sight.

That wasn't as reassuring as it should've been because Zoe could tell this wasn't a random encounter. Alana had sought her out. She picked up on that before Alana said her name.

"Zoe?" Alana tilted her head. "It is Zoe, right?"

Zoe managed a slight nod.

"I mean, your name is Zoe? Zoe with a Z. As in not Chloe?"

Zoe nodded again. "Yeah."

"You're Zoe Murphy?"

"Do you want to see my driver's license?"

“That won’t be necessary,” Alana deadpanned. Or not. It was possible she was that serious. “I just... You’re Connor Murphy’s sister, right?”

And there it was. Zoe gripped the straps of her backpack until her knuckles went white and she lost feeling. “What did he do?”

Alana blinked. “What do you mean?”

Zoe smiled tightly. “Is it your shirt or...” There weren’t any obvious stains on Alana’s clothes. “If you give me a receipt, I’ll talk to my parents about getting you reimbursed.”

“Reimbursed? For what?”

“For your shirt.”

“What’s wrong with my shirt?” Alana picked at the material.

“Did he cut it? He cut Robby Fenton’s shirt last year.”

“I remember that,” Alana breathed. She shook her head. “It’s not my shirt.”

Zoe looked her up and down. “Okay. What did-”

“Alicia,” Alana blurted out. “You know my sister Alicia?”

Zoe hesitated a moment before nodding. “We’re in jazz band together.”

“Were in jazz band together,” Alana corrected. “Alicia graduated last year.”

“Right,” Zoe muttered. She tried and failed to follow the path between Connor and Alicia and Alana’s shirt. She didn’t think her exhaustion was solely to blame for her inability to connect those dots.

“She says hi, by the way,” Alana beamed.

“Alicia says hi?” Zoe did a double take.

That was weird.

Not as weird as being ambushed and basically carded by Alana Beck, but still.

She didn’t think she’d ever said more than ten words to Alicia. Not together at least. They weren’t in the same section. Alicia played the saxophone, Zoe the guitar.

They were acquaintances at most. She couldn’t remember ever having a conversation with Alicia that went beyond “love your shoes – love your nails.”

“Well, yeah,” Alana chuckled. She twisted her hair in a way that made Zoe think she wasn’t being entirely truthful.

No shocker there.

Alana cleared her throat. “We were talking about our brother’s show. Alan. Do you know Alan?”

Zoe shook her head.

“He goes to Wells now. He has a show there. A radio show. It’s supposed to be all jazz, but he also talks to people and...” Alana let her breath out in a huff. “The music is pretty decent if you’re into that kind of thing. Alicia said you would like it.”

That was the weirdest thing Zoe had heard all day. She took a step backwards and plotted her escape.

Alana’s eyes went wide. “She said you were probably listening to it already.”

Zoe was listening to it already. If it was the show she was thinking of, it was good in a quirky, peaceful sort of way.

She wasn’t about to admit that though.

She pointed to her right. “I should go.”

“Go where? Home or do you have practice?” Alana shook her head like it didn’t matter. “I’ll walk with you.”

Zoe hadn’t seen that coming. She really should have. She tried to think of a tactful way to ditch Alana.

“Do you know if Connor listens to the show?” Alana asked in an excessively innocent tone.

Zoe couldn’t stop the laugh that escaped. “No.”

“No, you don’t know or no, he doesn’t?”

“No, he...” Zoe chewed her lip.

She’d left the radio on in the kitchen.

She’d found Connor in the kitchen.

The radio had still been on when he...

She blinked at Alana. “What’s this about?”

Alana’s mouth opened and closed like she wasn’t sure what to say, like she kept changing her mind. She reached into her backpack.

She pulled out a piece of paper.

She handed it to Zoe without saying a word.

Dear Evan Hansen...

That name sounded familiar.

Why did it sound familiar?

Zoe racked her brain, but she couldn't figure out where she'd heard it. Or when. Within the last two days, she was sure. She'd heard a lot of names in the last two days. Old ones, new ones, lots of roll calls and mispronunciations.

Evan Hansen.

Nothing.

She had nothing.

"Who's Evan Hansen?"

Zoe really hoped Alana never developed a gambling addiction because she didn't have a poker face. At all. Not even a little bit.

She looked like Zoe's question had crushed her to her very soul.

She tried to play it off by adjusting her backpack and flicking her shirt, but it was there.

Disappointment.

So much disappointment and Zoe had no idea why.

"That name sounds kind of familiar," Zoe said quickly. Because it was the right thing to say. For reasons she couldn't begin to guess, it was what Alana wanted to hear. "He goes here, doesn't he?"

Alana perked up a bit. "He's a senior."

"Oh," Zoe nodded. Not roll call then. "I don't know..."

Alana closed her eyes. She squeezed them shut.

There was something Zoe wasn't getting.

She looked at the paper again.

It was a letter.

Obviously.

A letter to Evan Hansen.... whoever that was.

She scanned it; her eyes moved so fast she barely skimmed the words.

And then she read it again.

And then she put it down because it was too much.

Because there's Zoe...

“What...”

“I found that in the computer lab,” Alana whispered. “I found it and I read it and I... Last night, I read part of it during my brother’s show and-”

“You read this on the air?” Zoe stared at the letter in horror. “People heard you read it?”

“I only read part of it!” Alana took a step back. “I didn’t name any names or...” She took a breath. “Someone called in and yelled at me about it and... and it sounded like Connor.”

Zoe stared at her for a beat. “My brother Connor?”

Alana nodded. “I’ve been playing it over in my head and yeah, the voice sounded like Connor.”

It was surprisingly easy for Zoe to connect those dots. She snorted when she did. “You think Connor wrote this?”

Alana shifted from foot to foot. She refused to meet Zoe’s eye. “Well, yeah, sort of, I-”

“There’s no way Connor wrote this.” Zoe let out a barking laugh.

Alana fell silent. “Has he ever mentioned Evan?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? Think about it. He must’ve said something.”

“Well, seeing as how I’d never even really heard of Evan Hansen until today...” Zoe clenched her teeth. Again with the disappointment. It was like she kept kicking Alana’s puppy. “We’re not close.”

It took Alana a moment to follow that. “You and Connor?”

Zoe nodded and then shrugged. “We’re not close. Like at all.”

Alana’s face lit up. “So, maybe-”

“This,” Zoe shook the letter, “doesn’t sound like Connor.”

“But you just said-”

“We’re not close, but I know my brother. He didn’t write this.”

“Then who did?”

Zoe startled at how desperate Alana sounded. “I don’t know.”

She glanced at Alana curiously. “Why do you care who wrote it?”

She hadn’t meant for that to be a stumper but it was. For the tiniest fraction of a second, Alana was at a loss for words. It was a strangely satisfying sight to see.

And then, just like that, it was gone. Alana’s mouth formed a thin line. “Because...” Alana sighed. “You read it, didn’t you?”

Zoe nodded.

“I want to find the person who wrote it, to make sure they’re... you know. Okay.”

Zoe chewed her lip. She started to hand the letter back. “Here.”

Alana shook her head. “Keep it. I have a copy.” Her hands flew up defensively when she saw Zoe’s expression. “Only one! I made that for you.”

Zoe jumped when Alana suddenly snatched it back.

“Let me just...” Alana dug a pen out of her bag. “Here’s my number. If you think of anything or hear anything or...” She shrugged. “Let me know.”

Alana gave her a small smile. A sad smile. A smile that suggested she thought she’d hit a dead end.

Which was a fair assessment.

Zoe slipped away without saying a word.

She didn’t believe in making promises she didn’t intend to keep.

Jenny still wanted to do a group *Glee* rewatch.

She’d spent the second half of her last period Chem class flooding everyone’s phones with her pleas.

Her request had already been denied by the time Zoe saw it.

Nicole had responded with a simple no.

Maya had been more emphatic.

No.

Nein.

Non.

Nihil.

No way, Jose.

Zoe snorted and stated her agreement. *What she said.*

She slipped her phone back into her bag and it hit her.

Two things hit her.

One, that her friends weren't together, that they weren't hanging out without her, that she hadn't been kicked off the island for being extra moody all day.

And two, she knew who Evan Hansen was.

She thought she knew.

No way, Jose.

The words smacked her in the face.

Evan. The boy Connor had pushed. His name was Evan. She knew his name was Evan. She didn't know how she'd known that, but she had.

She had no idea what his last name was.

Her gut knew.

Hansen.

It had to be.

She patted her backpack. She couldn't feel the letter, but it was there. She knew it was there.

She didn't pull it out. She kept it safely zipped away.

She would look at it again later. Much later. When the coast was clear and Connor wasn't staring her down from the hood of her car.

Her expression automatically shifted to mirror his. "What?"

Connor tapped the rubber band on his wrist like it was a watch.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Zoe drawled. "Unlike some people, I actually have friends who-"

"Your friends left fifteen minutes ago."

Zoe flinched at that. "What?"

"Your friends-" Connor repeated slowly, painfully, like each word brought him joy, "-left fifteen-"

“I heard you,” Zoe snapped. She chewed her lip. “Were they together?”

Connor looked like Christmas had come early. “Trouble in paradise?”

“Nooo...” Zoe closed her eyes for a moment. “We’re meeting somewhere and I’m not sure where.”

“You’re taking me home first, right?”

Connor looked so panicked she almost decided to mess with him a bit.

Almost.

She decided to be nice at the last second. She nodded and unlocked the car. “When is your punishment over?”

“TBD,” Connor shrugged.

Zoe raised her eyebrows at him. “They took your keys indefinitely? What did you do this time?”

He didn’t respond.

She hadn’t actually thought he would.

She started the car and cranked up the radio.

Don’t Stop Believin’ was playing.

She turned it off. Quickly. Like it was burning her ears.

Connor looked far too amused by that for her liking.

She ignored him and very pointedly looked over her shoulder while she backed out of the space.

She scowled when she saw the way Connor was scrolling through his phone. “Driver controls the music.”

“You turned it off, therefore forfeiting all rights to-”

“I’m not listening to whatever death metal-”

“I don’t listen to death metal!”

“To whatever emo crap-”

A trumpet blasted from Connor’s phone.

Polka music. Her brother was listening to what could only be described as a polka-reggae-ska mashup.

She was so shocked she forgot to grab the aux cord.

Connor started dancing to the music with an enthusiasm that she couldn't believe. Or unsee. Or understand.

"What?" His eyes widened in an annoyingly innocent way. "Isn't this what all the cool kids are listening to these days?"

Zoe simply stared.

"The college station. The one you – watch out!"

Zoe slammed on the brakes.

It was too late.

She heard the accident before she saw it. She slapped the steering wheel and threw the car into park. "Shit. What..."

A fender bender. She'd gotten into a fender bender in the school parking lot.

Her parents were going to kill her.

She turned on Connor. "You did that on purpose!"

Connor's face went blank for a second before he went on the defensive. The furiously defensive. "Did what?"

"You..." Zoe exhaled deeply. "You did that to distract me, to-"

"To what? To make you hit someone? You did that by yourself! That was all you!"

Zoe gripped the steering wheel. "Misery loves company. You can't drive, so you don't want me to-"

A car door slammed shut.

Connor slid so far down in his seat it was comical. He looked like a little kid hiding.

Zoe put a hand on her hip. "What are you..."

His hand flicked towards the windshield.

Zoe turned to see.

The other driver.

Right.

Of course.

She had to deal with that.

She unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the door and very briefly considered asking Connor to come with her.

That thought floated across her brain quickly, randomly, without warning. She couldn't remember the last time she'd wanted her big brother to back her up.

She wondered if she ever had.

She took a breath and focused on the other driver.

A teacher.

Right.

Of course.

Could the day get any worse?

And not just any teacher. Ms. Ross. The infamous Ms. Ross. Infamous for her assemblies. Zoe had never actually spent any time with her one-on-one.

Something clicked inside Zoe's brain. She glanced over her shoulder.

So, that was why Connor was trying to hide under the passenger's seat.

She gave Ms. Ross the most sheepish smile she could manage. "Hi! Sorry! I don't know what happened. I uh-"

Ms. Ross raised an eyebrow. "Were you texting?"

"No."

Ms. Ross closed her eyes and nodded. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"I'm counting that as a win."

Zoe pretended to flap her wings.

Ms. Ross smiled at that. "Let's go check out the damage."

There wasn't much damage.

Ms. Ross couldn't even tell if there was anything new on her "piece of crap of a car."

Zoe swallowed her laughter until Ms. Ross smiled. It was contagious and made her feel like the world wasn't going to end because she'd scratched her car.

"A bit of touchup paint and you'll be good to go," Ms. Ross beamed. "Try Bo's down the street. Tell him I sent you and he'll hook you up with the frequent flier discount."

Zoe nodded gratefully. She pointed at Ms. Ross's bumper. "Do you want my insurance info just in case?"

Ms. Ross waved her hand dismissively. "It was barely a tap. I think it might've straightened out that one dent I had back there."

Zoe didn't think that was how it worked. She nodded anyway.

"And I know where to find you if I see something later." Ms. Ross studied her for a second. "It's Zoe, right? Zoe Murphy?"

Zoe's head popped up in surprise.

"You're Connor's sister?"

And there it was.

Zoe glanced over her shoulder.

Connor was sitting up and scowling.

Not scowling.

Staring.

His face was unreadable.

Zoe looked away. "Yeah."

Ms. Ross smiled slightly. "Then I think we're done here. I know where to find you if something shows up."

Zoe climbed back in the car. She didn't start it until Ms. Ross had pulled away.

She met Connor's stare when she reached to put the car in drive. "What?"

"Did you talk about me?"

"What?" Zoe huffed.

"Did. You. Talk. About. Me?"

"Yes," Zoe snapped. She scoffed at his expression. "Because every conversation I have always revolves around you."

He stared at her like he couldn't tell if she was joking.

Which was fair.

She wasn't sure if she was.

She decided it would be in her best interest not to accelerate just yet. "She asked if I was your sister. That's it. I swear."

Connor didn't look like he believed her.

She didn't care enough to actually care.

She crept out of the parking lot at a snail's pace.

"I could walk home faster than this."

Zoe stopped the car and unlocked the doors. "Be my guest."

She chuckled when he didn't budge. "Beggars can't be choosers."

"Do you want me to drive? Mom's not home. They'll never know."

"I'll know."

Connor shrugged like he could live with that.

She accelerated so she was going the speed limit. The exact speed limit.

She made a show of using her signal.

She nearly ran a light when Connor started humming *Don't Stop Believin'*.

"What? It's stuck in my head," Connor muttered.

Zoe squeezed the steering wheel. "Did you see them?"

"Who?"

"My friends."

"I told you I did."

"You saw them leave?"

Connor nodded slowly.

"You..." She blinked at the sun.

She hadn't realized Connor knew her friends. Knew how to recognize them, at least. She was pretty sure he didn't know their names or anything that actually mattered.

“Were they together?”

Her voice came out smaller than she’d expected.

Connor glanced at her with something that almost resembled sympathy. “I only saw the blonde one.”

“Jenny,” Zoe nodded.

“She said to tell you to come to her house if you want to watch *Glee*.” Connor wrinkled his nose. “People still watch *Glee*?”

“Jenny does.”

“You’re friends with someone who still watches *Glee*?”

Zoe snorted in spite of herself. “Jenny’s nice.”

Connor shrugged and leaned back in his seat.

Zoe turned the radio back on.

It was playing a song she couldn’t place.

Connor started humming along.

She wondered if he realized what he was doing.

She wasn’t about to ask.

Zoe dropped her backpack on the kitchen floor and turned around. “Do you want a snack?”

“You’re going to make me a snack?”

“I asked if you want one. I didn’t say I’d make it.” Zoe drummed her fingers on the counter. “What time is Mom getting home?”

Connor raised his eyebrows. “You’re asking me?”

“Are we on our own for dinner or...” Zoe sighed. “There’s leftover lasagna.”

“I’m not eating that crap.”

“It’s not...” Zoe’s mouth snapped shut. She didn’t know why she was arguing about that. Habit, she supposed.

Connor rested his chin on his hand and grinned up at her. “It’s crap and you know it.”

“How long has this keto phase been going on? Six months? She has to be getting ready to switch things up again.”

Connor didn't say anything, but he didn't leave either.

Which was a surprise.

Usually, he bolted to his room the second they got home.

Or out the door, off to places unknown.

She couldn't remember the last time he'd hung out in the kitchen with her.

She wasn't sure what to make of it.

It felt like she was standing in a minefield.

She opened her backpack and took out her French book. She flipped through it while she peeled an orange.

And still Connor didn't leave.

She cleared her throat. “Do you want a piece?”

Connor didn't respond.

She hadn't really expected him to.

His silence had turned stony though. It prickled through her skin and awakened her inner spidey-sense.

She forced herself to look up.

He was holding the letter.

Her stomach dropped when she saw that.

She could only see the back of it, but she knew what it was. He'd gotten his hands on it somehow. It must've fallen out of her backpack or...

It must've fallen out.

That was the only explanation.

He hadn't gone into her bag. She was sure of that. Connor was a lot of things, but he wasn't a snoop.

She didn't know what to say.

Connor spoke first. His voice was disturbingly calm. “Where did you get this?”

Zoe ignored the question. “Do you know him?” She gave it a second before elaborating. “Evan Hansen?”

“Where did you get it?”

Zoe stared at her hands. She took a breath and made herself sit up. “I-”

Connor’s arm shook as he waved the letter at her. Not just waved. Shoved. He shoved it in her direction. Repeatedly.

It was like he was trying to fan her to death.

His hand never got near her face.

It didn’t matter.

She recoiled like she’d been slapped.

Connor’s face went blank. His arms snapped to his sides. His body went rigid and his face went blank, except his eyes.

A wave of emotions stormed through his eyes.

Anger. Confusion. Hurt.

The last one made her gulp.

He crumpled the letter and tossed it on the floor.

And then he was gone.

Out the door.

Off to places unknown.

She went to Jenny’s house after she finished her homework.

Because that was the safest choice.

Maya was at work and Nicole would pry.

Watching *Glee* with Jenny seemed like a small price to pay for a bit of peace.

She fell asleep during the second episode.

Jenny woke her up during the fourth.

“It’s late,” Jenny whispered.

Zoe nodded and stood to leave.

The house was dark when she got in.

The only light came from the lamp in the kitchen.

She poked her head in out of curiosity.

Her father looked as surprised to see her as she was to see him.

“Are you just getting home?”

She waited a second to see if he was going to go on, to toss out accusations and punishments and threats.

Nothing.

He just looked curious and slightly confused.

She nodded. “I was at Jenny’s.”

Her father nodded too. “I just got in a minute ago. I thought everyone was in bed.”

Zoe glanced at the driveway. Her mother’s car was still gone. “Where’s Mom?”

Her father frowned and stood up to see. He checked his phone. “She’s spending the night at Jamie’s.”

Zoe did a double take. Her aunt lived three hours away. “She went to Jamie’s?”

“To her apartment.”

“Oh,” Zoe muttered.

That made more sense.

She’d forgotten that Jamie had moved again.

“They’ve been painting all day.” Her father held up his phone to show off the photographic evidence.

Her mother and Jamie were wearing overalls that looked like they’d been splattered with every color of the rainbow. They were grinning from ear to ear.

Zoe couldn’t remember the last time her mother had looked that happy.

“Have you eaten?”

Zoe shook her head.

Her father opened the freezer and pulled out a pint of mint chocolate chip ice cream. “I got the green kind so we can tell your mother we ate something green.”

“But is it keto?”

Larry rolled his eyes. “Don’t tell me you care about that crap now too.”

Zoe snorted and grabbed a spoon.

“So.” Her father studied her for moment. “How’s school?”

“Good,” Zoe chirped. She took her time licking the spoon.

It was the best ice cream she’d had in ages. Not because it was particularly good. The flavor was only so-so.

There was something about eating ice cream out of the carton late at night though.

One look at her father confirmed he felt the same way.

“Why were you at work so late?”

“I’m working on this case about...”

Zoe poked at the ice cream and nodded along while he talked. She only half-listened to what he had to say.

Which was fine.

She knew there wouldn’t be a quiz.

And it wasn’t like she really cared about his job.

Just like he didn’t really care about her school.

She’d done them both a favor by switching subjects. This way, he could ramble on about his favorite thing and she could avoid an interrogation.

A Connor interrogation.

It was too early in the school year for a Zoe interrogation. Those only happened when the marking period was ending or there was a concert coming up. Just enough questions to make sure she was staying on track and wouldn’t be publicly humiliating her parents.

Connor interrogations could happen at any time.

How was he doing? How many times a day did she see him? Did he look like he was high? Was he playing nice with the other kids?

And so it went.

Like she truly had any insight into her brother's life.

Like she would tell their parents if she did.

“So, are you interested?”

Zoe dropped her spoon. Her father had asked her a question. She replayed it in her head. Was she interested? In what?

She had no idea.

Her father's eyes flashed knowingly. “In the internship. It doesn't pay anything, but it'll look great on your resume.”

“What internship?”

“At my office.”

Zoe shoved some ice cream in her mouth to buy herself some time.

“It'll only be for a month, two tops. Just until this case gets wrapped up. It's all hands on deck.”

“I'll think about it.”

It was a promise Zoe intended to keep. For a second. And then she'd forget about it. So would her father. She was sure of that.

“Both of Frank's daughters are helping out, so you wouldn't be the only one. You'd be filing mostly. Maybe answering some phones.”

“Are you going to ask Connor too?”

She didn't know why she'd asked.

She already knew the answer to that.

Her father tilted his head. “Do you think I should?”

Zoe simply shrugged.

A yawn slipped out of her mouth. She made a show of stretching. “Bedtime.”

Her father reached for his phone. “Leave the hall light on. I'm going to be awhile”

Connor's door was closed.

Zoe stood outside it for a minute or two or five.

She listened to the silence.

It could mean several things.

Connor was out.

Connor was asleep.

Connor had his earbuds in.

Connor was staring at the ceiling, drowning in existential angst.

She kept going.

She went into her room and locked the door.

She didn't sleep.

She couldn't.

Not right away.

Her nap had messed up her circadian rhythm.

She stared at the ceiling and drowned. Not in existential angst. A different kind. A quieter kind.

She turned the radio on.

She caught the end of Alana's brother's show.

Nothing eventful happened.

No one screamed, no one yelled, no one shared any secrets that didn't belong to them.

Alana's brother had the most ridiculous voice in the world.

It was velvet. Pure velvet.

Zoe turned the radio off when someone started to yodel. There was no way she was falling asleep to that.

She checked her phone.

Jenny was gloating about the fact that she'd successfully started a partial-group *Glee* rewatch.

Maya thought Zoe was a traitor.

Nicole wanted to know if she was okay.

What did Connor do this time?

Zoe ignored the question, even though Nicole had asked her individually and not in the group chat.

She put her phone down.

What had Connor done?

Nothing, really.

Nothing bad.

Nothing weird either.

It was the nothing of it that had gotten to her.

She knew what to think, how to react, when he shouted and raged. She knew when and how to fight back. She knew when to flee. She knew how to deal with his sarcasm. She could give as good as she got.

She was used to his moods.

It worried her when they disappeared.

He'd gone blank when she found him in the kitchen.

And she didn't know why.

She hadn't known. She thought she did now.

He'd been on the phone. The radio had been on. She'd left it on. Which meant it had been playing Alana's brother's show.

Which meant she'd seen him in the aftermath.

He went blank after yelling at Alana about the letter to Evan Hansen.

She rubbed her forehead.

She was way too tired to think about what that meant. To worry about what it meant.

She'd spent an entire night thinking about what it meant. It had haunted her in her dreams.

She sat up and padded across the room to her desk. She opened her drawer and pulled out the crumpled up ball that was the letter.

She smoothed it out.

She ignored the text and went straight to the number at the top.

Alana's number.

She put it in her phone just in case.

Jared

“That’s what you’re eating for breakfast?”

Jared sprayed the whipped cream straight into his mouth and smacked his lips. “Mmm. Protein.”

“There’s no protein in that.” Henry waved his shake in Jared’s face. “You want protein, I’ll make you one of these.”

Jared gave himself enough squirt. “Mmm. Fake sugar.”

“You can’t eat like that forever, you know. One of these days, it’s going to catch up with you and then you’ll be sorry.”

“I had a kale salad for lunch yesterday. I’m set for a month!”

Henry looked him up and down. “My weights are your weights. Feel free to use them whenever you want.”

“I think I’m doing okay.” Jared lifted his shirt up to pat his stomach.

That was a mistake.

A huge mistake.

He blamed it on the video games. All of them. Every single game he’d ever played was responsible for destroying his sleep pattern and dulling his reflexes.

Henry didn’t have that problem. He worked out. He slept twelve hours a day. He didn’t spend hours upon hours in front of a screen. It was easy for him to grab his little brother and squeeze his soft six-packless stomach until he cried out in defeat.

It was not a dignified way to start the day.

Jared smoothed down his shirt and fixed Henry with the sternest stare he could manage. “Why are you still here?”

Henry helped himself to a squirt of whipped cream. “I live here.”

“You live in a dorm now or have you forgotten?”

Henry frowned like he had forgotten.

Jared snorted and stole the whipped cream back. He slapped Henry’s arm as he went by. “Good chat, bro. Please be gone when I get home.”

“I’m only here to do laundry!” Henry called after him.

“You’re here so Mom can wash your tighty whities?” Jared spun around to give him two thumbs up. “That’s going on the list of things I’ll never do when I bust out of this place, right after wearing muscle tees all day, every day, and before turning into a protein powder addict.”

Henry’s eyes darted around while he tried to process that zinger.

Jared resisted the urge to smirk.

He knew when to make an exit.

He grabbed his backpack and practically tripped over himself in his rush to get out the door before Henry could catch up.

Jared cursed his luck when he realized it was raining.

He needed sustenance. The whipped cream wasn’t enough. He was a growing boy. A growing man. A growing boy-man.

He needed a donut or an egg sandwich or one of those weird croissant hybrids.

And coffee. He needed caffeine. It was his brain food.

But it was raining.

Rain meant traffic and delays and lines at all the drive-thrus.

He didn’t have time for that.

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and considered his options. He could cross his fingers and hope that Henry was busy taking his morning dump so he could run back inside and grab a pop tart in peace.

Or he could hit that dinky diner on Third Street.

There was never a line there. They practically paid people to take their food.

Jared leaned forward to look inside.

Henry was doing chin-ups in the living room.

That settled it.

Dinky diner it was.

He passed him before he saw him.

Really, he did.

He didn't notice Evan until he pulled up to a stop sign and checked his reflection in the rearview mirror.

And even then, it took him a second to process who and what he was seeing because of the downpour.

Evan was pissed.

Jared chuckled when he saw that.

He unlocked the doors and rolled down the passenger's window. "Need a ride?"

A series of emotions floated across Evan's face. Anger. Exasperation. Disbelief. Acceptance. He got in the car without saying a word.

Jared made a face. "You smell like wet dog."

"You sprayed me!"

"I did?" Jared snickered.

Evan wrung his shirt out on the floor.

Jared smacked his arm and regretted it. Evan's shirt was soaked. It was disgusting. "You're ruining the upholstery!"

Evan raised an eyebrow and gave his shirt another twist. "Wasn't this your mom's car when we were kids?"

"Yeah," Jared huffed. "So?"

Evan gave him an I'm-smarter-than-you look.

Jared gave him the bird.

"I didn't think you were going to stop."

Jared glanced at him quickly. "I didn't see you back there."

"You didn't see me?" Evan looked absolutely dumbfounded by that.

Jared focused on the road, on the wipers, on anything besides the fact that Evan thought so little of him.

He turned the radio on.

"Why were you walking?"

Evan didn't say anything for a minute. "What do you mean?"

"Doesn't your mom usually drop you off?"

“Sometimes. She was supposed to today, but she got called into work early and I missed the bus.”

“Oh,” Jared nodded. He smirked at the mirror. “Good thing your knight in shining armor came along then.”

“Do knights usually try to drown their damsels-in-distress before they save them?” Evan rolled his eyes when Jared started to crack up. “Yes, I realize I just made it sound like I’m a... where are you going?”

Jared laughed even harder at the panic in Evan’s voice. “I need sustenance.”

“We’re going to be late!”

It was Jared’s turn to roll his eyes. “We have plenty of time.”

“We have, like, ten minutes!”

“Like I said. Plenty of time.”

“The school’s ten minutes away!”

“Not if you drive the way I do.” Jared pulled up to the window. “I’ll take an egg sandwich and a medium coffee.” He turned to face Evan. “You want anything?”

Evan shook his head dazedly.

“Just the sandwich and the coffee then.” Jared crept forward. There were three cars in front of him. Still better than if he’d hit Dunkin. “Would you relax?”

“We’re going to miss homeroom. We’re going to get detention. We’re going to-”

“I’ve got it covered.” Jared waved his hand dismissively.

“How?” Evan demanded. “How do you have it covered?”

“I know people in the office.”

“You know people in the...” Evan squeezed his eyes shut.

Jared chuckled as he inched forward.

Two cars to go.

“You look like your brain’s about to explode.” Jared wagged a finger at him. “What did I say about the upholstery?”

Evan took a breath. “When you say people-”

“The lady at the desk. What’s her name?”

“A close personal friend of yours?” Evan scoffed.

Jared narrowed his eyes. “The one with the curls. She’s in my mom’s book club. I watch her kids every month while she gets wine drunk. She owes me big.”

He snapped his fingers. “Candice? No, that’s the other one. There are a lot wine moms in that club. I make bank.”

“People pay you to watch their kids?”

“Hey, I’m a very responsible, respectable young man.”

“The wine moms must have low standards.”

Jared clutched his chest and pretended to gasp. “And here I am, giving you a ride to school out of the goodness of my heart.”

“I thought it was so I wouldn’t tell my mom you left me stranded on the side of the road.”

“That too,” Jared nodded. He pulled up to the next window and paid for his food.

He checked the time as subtly as he could.

It was later than he’d thought.

He took a leisurely sip of his coffee.

Evan did not look amused.

“It’s going to be fine,” Jared promised. “Mary will write us a note.”

“Mary?”

“Marie?” Jared frowned. “The one with the curls.”

Evan slumped down in his seat. “I’ve never had detention.”

Jared lifted his hand. “First time detention high five?”

Evan pressed his face against the window and sighed.

Mary/Marie was not at the desk when they arrived.

Which was a shame because they really were late. Late-late. Empty halls late.

Evan looked like he wanted to die.

Jared would have been amused if it weren’t for his stomach. The egg sandwich was not agreeing with him. Or maybe it was the coffee.

There was also a chance it was guilt. Guilt and anxiety over what Ms. Ross was going to do to them.

She did not look amused either. “That rain. You boys get stuck behind the accident on Orson too?”

Jared nodded eagerly. “Yeah.”

He gave Evan his best I-told-you-so look.

That settled it.

He was untouchable.

Everything always worked out in his favor.

Evan shifted from foot to foot.

Jared willed him not to blow this for them by saying something stupid.

Ms. Ross jotted something down and handed them each a green hall pass. She smiled when she gave Evan his. “We have an appointment this afternoon, don’t we? Two o’clock?”

Evan was a deer caught in the headlights.

It was funny, but also sort of not.

Ms. Ross blinked when she realized she’d made a mistake. “To go over your transcript?”

Evan managed a slight nod. He mumbled something that almost contained words and turned to go.

He walked right into Alana Beck.

Now that was hilarious.

Jared laughed so hard he wheezed.

Alana clutched her forehead. “We have got to stop meeting like this.”

Evan took off without so much as an apology.

Jared opened his mouth to make one for him.

Alana started speaking before he could. “Is Ms. White here? Mr. Johnson asked me to get the blue poster from her.” Alana’s mouth twisted like she wasn’t sure what that meant.

Ms. Ross shook her head and stood up. “She had to take a call, so I’m manning the desk for a minute. The blue poster?” Ms. Ross tapped her chin. “I think I saw it in the back.”

Jared started towards the door.

Alana pounced on him before he could leave. Not literally. She jumped in front of him with a speed that would've impressed Henry.

Jared tripped backwards into the wall.

"Sorry," Alana winced. She tapped her fingers together in front of her. "Hey. Question."

"Okay," Jared said slowly.

Alana chewed her lip and didn't go on.

Jared checked the time. He was seriously late for Spanish.

He could live with that.

"What?" Jared prompted.

Alana stared at her feet.

Ms. Ross was back.

Alana went to help her with the blue poster.

Jared took that as his cue to go.

It was still raining when lunch rolled around.

Which sucked because it made Jared want to stay put. What was the point in being a senior if you couldn't use your off-campus lunch privileges every day? Strutting back into the building with a McFlurry while all the underclassmen wept with jealousy almost made the previous three years of high school hell worth it.

Almost.

Greasy, day-old cafeteria fries didn't do the trick. Not even a little bit.

Jared ate them anyway.

He sat at the same table he'd been sitting at since he was fourteen with the same guys he'd been sitting with since he was twelve. He knew two of their names.

He put his headphones on and jammed out to his rainy-day playlist.

That was what he liked about his table.

He wasn't the only one jamming out to his music and doing his own thing, though he thought it was safe to say the other guys weren't listening to *Once on This Island* too.

He glanced around quickly in case anyone could tell what he had on. His defense was ready to go if they could. It was like an audiobook but people sang the story. There was nothing weird or embarrassing about it at all.

It wasn't like he listened to cat impersonators who liked to yodel and sing the blues.

He snorted when he switched to the clip Henry had sent him.

He looked up from his phone, ready and eager to share it with anyone who had noticed his amusement.

No one had.

He hunched over his tray and shielded his phone while he tried to figure out why his brother had sent him that particular song.

He tried to look mysterious, but he was pretty sure people thought he was watching porn.

He could live with that.

He finished the song and sent Henry a series of question marks.

The response was instantaneous.

That's from Phil's show!

Jared had no idea who Phil was. He didn't care enough to ask.

He switched back to his rainy-day playlist.

His phone buzzed with an onslaught of texts.

He closed his eyes and reluctantly went to see what Henry was shouting about.

All my friends have shows now.

Not all of them-all of them but

Phil has a show. Trevor has a show. Even Alan has one.

Do you think I should get one?

Jared had no idea what kind of show Henry was talking about. He knew the answer to that question though. *No.*

Aww, why not? I'd sound good on the radio.

Jared cringed at the thought. *Definitely not.*

Henry didn't say anything for a minute.

Jared could picture him pouting at his phone.

You want to hear something random?

Jared snorted. *Always.*

Alan asked me if I know Evan.

Jared blinked at his phone. *Evan Hansen?*

Yeah.

I told Al you're Evan's best friend. He seemed surprised.

He kept asking me questions about

Jared waited for Henry to go on.

He put his phone down when he didn't.

He could always tell when Henry was done talking. He'd probably gotten distracted by something shiny.

Jared nodded his head to the music and thought. And thought. And thought some more.

He opened his browser and looked up his brother's school.

They had a radio station.

He opened its page.

He looked at the list of shows. It was easy to spot the ones Henry's friends hosted.

Trevor Time

Yodel-Phil-Hee-Hoo

The Jazz Club with Alan Beck

Jared dropped his phone in his lap.

His eyes darted around the room. They landed on the table where Tracy Jacobs was sitting.

Alana wasn't there.

If she wasn't with Tracy, then she wasn't in the cafeteria.

Jared wasn't sure what he would've done if she was there.

Nothing, probably.

His heart was just racing because of the weirdness of the situation.

Alan Beck had to be related to Alana Beck. He looked like he could be her twin.

Alan had asked Henry about Evan. Alana had tried to ask Jared a question.

About Evan?

There was no way to know.

Why would Alana want to know about Evan? Why would anyone want to know about Evan?

Evan was Evan. He was the most Evan person Jared knew.

Why would a guy who was friends with a yodeling cat impersonator want to know about Evan?

It didn't make sense.

Jared cranked his music up.

He leaned back in his chair and listened to Ti Moune turn into a tree.

The rain stopped right before Jared's last period art class.

It was a sight to see. A beautiful rainbow filled the sky.

Mr. Nelson took the class outside so they could paint it. Or draw it. Or do whatever they wanted to show how the rainbow made them feel.

It only took a minute for that to turn into chaos. Mr. Nelson didn't mind. In fact, he encouraged it. He went back inside to find sidewalk chalk for the students who were inspired to express their feelings by defacing school property.

Jared broke away from that pack because he hated the feeling of chalk on his hands. He decided to draw a cartoon rainbow and color it with markers. He wondered if his mother would put it on the fridge, next to one of the recipes she'd never cook.

He found a semi-dry spot on the pavement and settled in. The rainbow was already fading, but that didn't matter. No one was really paying attention to it.

He pulled out his sketchbook and sharpened his pencil and got to work. He'd only drawn three lines when a shadow filled the page.

A human shadow.

Rude.

“Hey, you’re blocking my light!” He shook his head when the person didn’t budge. “Go find your own spot. This one is...”

Jared gulped when he twisted around. “You can’t kill me. There are witnesses.”

He thought it would be in his best interest to remind Connor Murphy about that.

Connor did not look amused. He did take a step to the side though. “Are you having an amazing day?”

Jared tilted his head and wrinkled his nose. “What?”

“Are you-”

“It’s been okay,” Jared shrugged. “I mean, the rain’s been kind of a downer, but you know. Shit happens.”

He shrugged again.

He focused on his drawing when Connor didn’t respond.

He was starting to feel like he needed to amend his answer because discussing the weather with Connor Murphy automatically downgraded an okay day to a weird one.

He decided it would be in his best interest not to say that out loud.

“Do you wish that everything was different?”

Apparently, Connor had found his voice.

“Today or in general? I mean, the rain sucks and all, but-” Jared burst out laughing. “Oh my God. Your face. What...”

Connor jabbed his finger in the direction of Jared’s lap. “You’re drawing the rainbow?”

“Yeah,” Jared chuckled. “What are you going to do? Carve it into your thighs?”

He lowered his head when Connor’s face went blank. Scarily blank. Jared’s eyes darted around the lawn. The closest classmate was ten feet away. He tried and failed to catch her eye.

He scooted a bit closer and threw his sketchbook onto the grass. It made a loud whomping sound.

Nothing. No one looked up.

“You’re not writing to it?”

It took Jared a second to follow that, to realize that Connor was still talking to him and not plotting his death. “To the rainbow?”

“You’re not sending it a letter?”

Jared did not follow that at all.

“Isn’t that how you express yourself? You write letters.”

“I email my grandmother sometimes,” Jared said. He stared off into the horizon. “How would you write to a rainbow? I mean, I get how you would but why? You’d be better off writing to Lucky Charms. He could actually write back. You know, if he wasn’t a cartoon.”

“You could write to Evan Hansen about the rainbow.”

Jared burst out laughing again. “Why would I do that?”

That threw Connor. Jared wasn’t sure why, but it did.

He shook his head and chuckled some more. “Are you high?” He slapped his forehead. “Stupid question. Of course, you’re-”

“Stay away from my sister,” Connor snarled before storming away.

Jared made a face at Connor’s back. He kept an eye on him for a minute to see where he was going to sit.

It didn’t surprise him when Connor strode past their classmates and stomped down the stairs to the parking lot instead.

Jared kept an eye out for Evan while he packed up his things. He fussed with his locker for as long as he could. Which was about two minutes because his attention span was always at its worst at the end of the school day.

He closed his locker and looked around.

No Evan.

He wanted to leave, but he didn’t know if he should. He’d driven Evan to school. Did that mean he was responsible for getting him home? He didn’t want to take any chances there. He needed gas money and snacks.

He sent Evan a quick text. *Where you at?*

He stared at his phone and waited. And waited.

He waited for an entire minute before giving up.

He pocketed his phone and set off on an Evan search. He tried to think of all the places that Evan could be hiding.

He didn’t have the energy to check all the bathrooms.

He did a lap of the second floor before heading down. He could honestly tell his parents he'd tried. That had to count for something, didn't it? At least twenty dollars' worth of gas.

He tried to ignore the feeling in his gut. The feeling of guilt and disappointment.

The disappointment was a surprise.

It shouldn't have been. He was curious. About Evan.

It was enough to downgrade a weird day to a bizarre one.

There was no reason for him to be curious. Or there was, but nothing would come of it. He knew what would happen if he tried to talk to Evan about Alan and Alana and Connor.

Evan would stammer and stumble and blink at him like he was the sun.

It wouldn't go over well at all.

So, there was no point in trying.

Jared nodded to himself.

He started towards the exit.

And then he stopped because of course that was the moment he finally located Evan.

He knew it was Evan even though his back was to him. He recognized the backpack and the shirt.

He recognized Ms. Ross too. Obviously. Because she was facing him.

He slowed down and pretended to fiddle with his backpack. He angled his head to better hear their conversation.

"-anytime." Ms. Ross looked like she wanted to hug Evan or maybe pat his arm.

Evan nodded stiffly.

"People care about you. Your mother-"

Evan practically threw himself backwards.

Because he'd spotted Jared.

Jared grinned when he realized that was the reason. It took all of his self-restraint not to laugh.

Evan frantically looked from Ms. Ross to Jared and back again. "What-"

"Do you need a ride home?" Jared asked in his most upbeat, teacher's pet voice.

Evan shook his head. "I'm taking the bus."

Jared checked the time. "The buses are gone."

He wasn't sure if that was right. He hadn't taken the bus in ages. He couldn't remember the last time he'd taken it. He'd ridden with Henry until he got his license. He had no idea how the whole bus system worked.

Evan didn't call him on it though, so he figured that meant he was right.

"I'll-I'll call my mom then," Evan said. He closed his eyes before glancing in Ms. Ross's general direction. "Are we-"

"Go." Ms. Ross waved him off. "If you hurry, you can still make it."

That was all Evan needed to hear.

He took off like a shot.

Jared frowned after him.

He was getting the feeling that he'd been snubbed somehow.

He didn't like it.

He passed his car twice before he realized his mistake.

He passed it the first time because he was lost in his head.

He passed it the second time because there were people standing there.

Two people. Girl people.

He'd mistakenly assumed he had the wrong car. Because that was the most logical explanation. It made more sense to think there was another car that looked exactly like his, right down to the 'I brake for butterflies' bumper sticker, than it did to think there were two girls waiting for him.

And they were waiting for him. Not just waiting in general. Not standing around and gossiping with no sense of where they were.

They didn't have the wrong car.

They were waiting for him.

He got that as soon as they looked up.

He felt a flash of excitement when he realized one of them was Alana Beck. He had a feeling his bizarre day was about to take a turn for the amazing.

It took him a second to place the other one.

“You’re Connor Murphy’s sister, aren’t you?”

She cringed in a way that made him think he was right.

“I’m supposed to stay away from you.”

Connor’s sister raised her eyebrows at Alana. They had one of those silent conversations all girls seemed capable of having.

Jared raised his hands slowly. “I come in peace.”

Connor’s sister put a hand on her hip. “Are you sure about this?”

Alana chewed her lip and stepped forward. “Jared, Zoe. Zoe, Jared.”

Jared stuck out his hand.

Zoe reluctantly shook it.

“Now that that’s settled...” Alana glanced at Zoe, even though it was clear she was the one leading things. She straightened herself up to her full height. “We’re conducting a poll.”

“A poll?” Jared repeated.

He didn’t buy that for a second, even if it was Alana Beck asking.

Something about her expression made him think she was full of it.

“Yes,” Alana chirped. “For the...”

“Paper.”

“Yearbook.”

Alana and Zoe glanced at each other in horror and tried again.

“Yearbook.”

“Paper.”

“We’re not sure yet,” Zoe said.

Alana cleared her throat. “We’re just gathering the information for now.”

“And you want to ask me?” Jared glanced around the parking lot. He gestured at the clusters of students who were still hanging around.

“We already got them,” Alana said quickly.

Jared didn't buy that for a second.

He nodded anyway. "Okay. Shoot."

Alana scrolled through her phone. "Do you prefer phone calls or texts?"

"Texts."

"FaceTime or regular calls?"

"FaceTime." Jared struck a pose.

"Do you send postcards when you go on vacation?"

"Hells yeah."

Alana glanced up in surprise. "Really?"

"Gotta rub it in and tell my peeps how good it is to be somewhere they're not."

"Do you send Evan postcards?"

It was the first question Zoe had asked. There was no way that was a coincidence.

Jared took a step back. "Is that you asking or your brother?"

"My brother?" Zoe's face scrunched up with confusion.

Alana shook her phone to make Jared focus on her. "How many emails do you send a week?"

Jared thought about that for a second before tilting his head. "I don't know. Five? Maybe. What's this for again?"

"Are they personal or for school?"

"School, mostly. What-"

"Do you ever email Evan?" Zoe whipped around to meet Alana's stare. "What? We aren't getting anywhere with him."

Jared looked between them. "Evan again? What's-"

"Again?" Alana lowered her phone.

Zoe folded her arms across her chest. "Do you email Evan or not?"

"Not," Jared said slowly with more than a hint of confusion. "I mean, once in a while, maybe. Usually about homework. And there may have been a funny forward or two when we were twelve."

Zoe's face went blank. "And that's it?"

Jared stared off into the distance. “We text, mostly. Because our moms are friends and I’m the closest to one he’s got.”

The girls fell silent.

So silent that Jared felt the need to clarify. “To a friend, not a mom. I’m the closest thing he has to a friend. He has a mom. An actual mom. Not a-”

Zoe put her hand up. “I think we’re done.” She sighed and looked at Alana. “It’s not him.”

Alana considered that for a moment. “No. Probably not.”

“Probably?” Zoe laughed. “What part of that makes you think he wrote the letter?”

“Letter?” Jared frowned. “Why does everyone keep...”

Alana pulled a paper out of her bag.

Zoe’s mouth dropped open. “You can’t be serious.”

“He might be able to help,” Alana whispered. She nodded to her left and stepped away.

Far away.

Far enough that it was obvious she didn’t want Jared hearing whatever she had to say.

Zoe sighed and went after her.

Jared stayed put because how could he not?

He didn’t even try to pretend he wasn’t watching and attempting to read their lips.

It didn’t work.

He wondered if there was a YouTube tutorial about how to read lips. There had to be. He made a mental note to seek it out.

The girls returned. Alana took the lead again.

“When you text Evan, what kind of things do you text about?”

Jared raised his eyebrows. “This is the weirdest newspaper-slash-yearbook poll I’ve ever heard.”

The girls exchanged a look.

“Just answer the question,” Zoe said.

“Please,” Alana added.

Jared pointed at Alana. “Good cop.” He pointed at Zoe. “Bad cop. You two might have a future in-”

Zoe looked Alana in the eye. “There’s no way he wrote that letter.”

“What letter?” Jared yelled.

The question came out about an octave higher than he would’ve liked.

He refused to feel embarrassed.

“He might know who did,” Alana murmured. “Does Evan have any other friends? I’ve never seen him with anyone else.”

Jared squinted at the two of them. “What’s this about? And don’t say it’s for the yearbook-slash-newspaper.”

Alana lifted the paper in her hands.

“Don’t,” Zoe cautioned.

Alana didn’t put it down. “He might be able to help.”

“How?” Zoe demanded.

“Something might ring a bell. Maybe he can point us in the right direction or-”

Jared rubbed his hands together and put on his evilest smirk. “You must be truly desperate to come to me for-”

“Don’t with the supervillain schtick.” Zoe rolled her eyes.

Jared pretended to zip his lips.

He glanced at the paper Alana was holding. He couldn’t make out any of the words, but he could see the format.

It looked like a letter.

Something shifted inside him. “This is all about Evan, isn’t it?”

Zoe looked at Alana. Alana did not look at Zoe.

She kept her eyes on Jared.

“Yeah. It’s about Evan.”

Cynthia

Cynthia didn't bolt up in her bed. She sat up slowly, quietly, carefully so as not to disturb Larry. She didn't ask if he'd heard the noise because she already knew the answer.

He was asleep. Sound asleep, even though they'd only been in bed for a few minutes.

That was a good sign. It meant his case was going well, that his brain was letting him rest for a change. She preferred that to the alternative. It was hard to sleep when she knew he was still up, poring over his files and drinking coffee like it was water.

She got up even though there was no need. She knew the noise was nothing. It was in her head, most likely. Or it was the house settling or that raccoon that wouldn't leave their trashcans alone.

Or it was something. There was always the chance it was something.

That was why she got up.

The house was dark. She didn't turn on a light. She crept down the hall to Zoe's room first. She opened the door as carefully as she could.

Zoe was asleep, naturally. She was curled up in a ball with her hair fanning across the pillow. Her thumb was so close to her mouth that Cynthia wondered if she still sucked it sometimes.

There was no way to tell.

That was just one of the things Cynthia would never know about her daughter. Zoe wouldn't know the answer if she was asked and if she did know, she'd never tell. She'd never admit she still sucked her thumb, not even to her mother.

Especially not to her mother. Cynthia often felt like that was the case.

She closed the door and breathed.

Two down, one to go.

She had to check on Connor and do a quick sweep of the downstairs and then she was done. She could rest.

She tapped on Connor's door lightly before opening it. She didn't dare go in without warning, not even in the middle of the night when she was sure her son was sleeping.

When he should be sleeping.

She couldn't tell if he was.

He was in his bed. The lights were off. He was breathing.

That was all she needed to see.

She turned to go.

He rolled over and for a second, she thought she saw his eyes.

She froze.

He didn't.

He rolled back over and that was it. Moment over.

She thought about saying something, but what would she say? That she was checking on him? That she thought she'd heard a noise?

And what if he was asleep? What if her voice woke him up?

She tiptoed to the door. She lingered a moment before closing it. "Good night, sweetie."

She thought she saw his shoulder shake.

"Was it Ricky?" Larry asked with a grin.

Cynthia closed the door and untied her robe. "Ricky?"

"The raccoon. Zoe calls him that."

Cynthia shook her head. "I don't know what it was."

"Probably nothing."

"Probably." Cynthia yawned and eyed her pillow. "Are you going to be up awhile?"

"I wasn't planning on it, but..."

Cynthia smiled tightly. "Inspiration struck."

In the five minutes she was gone, he'd managed to turn their bed into a desk.

She didn't know why she was surprised. It wasn't the first time that had happened. Far from it, really.

It was just that she'd thought he was asleep. Sound asleep. She hated to be wrong about things like that.

"I can go downstairs," Larry offered.

Cynthia shook her head and smothered a yawn. "I'll go watch tv for a bit."

“I’ll come get you when I’m done.”

Cynthia forced herself to smile.

She woke up before her alarm, which was a good thing because her phone wasn’t anywhere near her. It was on her nightstand.

She sat up and immediately regretted it. The couch was not meant for sleeping. It was pretty and had good lumbar support but was not designed for all-nighters.

She tied her robe and smoothed her hair and went upstairs to brush her teeth.

Larry was asleep. Their bed was free of papers.

She rolled her eyes and kept walking.

Larry was the first one down.

He kissed her cheek on his way to the coffee. “You looked so peaceful I didn’t want to wake you.”

She smiled to show she’d accepted his apology and went to call up the stairs. “Connor? Zoe? It’s almost 7:20.”

Zoe appeared on the landing.

“Is your brother up?”

Zoe shrugged and looked over her shoulder. “Connor? You up?”

She ran down the stairs without waiting for an answer. “I have to get to school early. I’m meeting a friend.”

Cynthia whipped around when she realized Zoe was heading for the door. “What friend?”

“You don’t know him.”

“Him?”

“Them.” Zoe closed her eyes. “Is it okay if I have people over after school?”

Cynthia couldn’t hide her surprise. Zoe never had friends over anymore. “Yes. Of course. Your friends are always welcome here.”

“Cool, great.” Zoe turned to go.

“What about your brother?”

Zoe spun around and narrowed her eyes. “What about him?”

“He’s not ready.”

“Why is it my job to chauffeur Connor everywhere? Am I being punished too?”

Cynthia’s mouth dropped open. “No! Of course not. It’s just-”

“I’m going to be late.”

Cynthia knew when to pick her battles. “Come have some cereal at least.”

“Cereal?” Zoe laughed. She scoffed at her mother’s expression. “I’ll grab a banana for the road. And that’s it. I have to go. Alana’s already there.”

Zoe ran into the kitchen.

Cynthia didn’t wait for her to return.

If she hurried, she could be dressed and ready in time to drop Connor off before her Pilates class.

She knocked on his door as she went by. “Connor! Wheels up in fifteen minutes!”

Fifteen minutes turned into twenty. Twenty turned into twenty-five.

Cynthia tried not to let her frustration show. She kept her eyes focused on the road and let the soothing sounds of talk radio wash over her.

“It’s fine. It’s fine. You’re going to be on time.”

She chanced a glance in Connor’s direction.

He was staring blankly out the window. He didn’t look the least bit upset about anything. Not about being late, not about missing breakfast, not about being driven to school by his mother. Nothing.

“Are you hungry? I might have a granola bar in my bag.”

“Is it keto?”

Cynthia chuckled at her son’s expression. “Of course.”

“No, thanks.”

The ‘thanks’ made her smile. He had manners. At least he had manners.

“Is there anything interesting happening in school today?”

Connor shrugged.

“Any tests or...” Nothing. He wasn’t going to give her anything. She knew a losing battle when she saw one.

“You can let me out here.”

They were three blocks from the school. She checked the locks when he reached for the handle. “You won’t make it in time if you walk.”

“I walk fast.” Connor turned to face her. “Unless there’s another reason you don’t want to let me out. You don’t trust me. You think I’m going to ditch.”

Cynthia considered her options. Strict, gentle, funny. She decided to attempt funny. “You want to get out here? Are you embarrassed to be seen with your mother?”

Humor had been the wrong route.

She realized that before the words had finished leaving her mouth, before she saw his face.

She pulled over immediately. “There you go. A two block safety net. No one will know you got dropped off by...”

Wrong road. She kept going down the wrong road. She reached out to touch his arm.

He pulled away.

It took all of her willpower not to flinch. “I trust you, sweetie. I do.”

He opened the door.

She wanted to tell him to have a good day, to call out some words of encouragement.

She kept her mouth shut because it was the right thing to do. Her gut told her it was what he wanted.

She wondered if her gut was right.

“I don’t get it.”

Cynthia stabbed a shrimp with her fork. “Get what?”

“Your day, your life.” Jamie looked at her like she belonged in a zoo. “Walk me through it.”

Cynthia daintily sipped her water. “What don’t you get?”

“This.” Jamie chuckled. She waved a hand in Cynthia’s general direction. “You wake up in the morning and you what?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you do all day?”

Cynthia twisted her hands around in her lap. “Lots of things.”

“Like what?”

Cynthia lifted an eyebrow. “Are you suggesting I’m lazy because I don’t work? Being a stay-at-home mom is a perfectly valid life choice. We can’t all be literary warriors like you.”

Jamie puffed up a bit. “Literary warrior? I like that. That might just be the nicest thing you’ve ever called me.”

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

Jamie hummed at that. She took a bite of her burger. The sauce dripped down her chin.

Cynthia looked away so she wouldn’t reach across the table and clean her sister’s face.

Jamie chugged her soda and finally, mercifully, wiped her mouth. “I got it when the kids were little, but they’re big now. They’re practically adults.”

“Connor’s going to be eighteen in a couple weeks.”

Jamie gave her a look. “My point exactly.”

“They still need their mother.”

“Sure,” Jamie agreed with a nod. “For money and...” Jamie tilted her head like she had no idea what else her niece and nephew could possibly need.

Which was fair.

Jamie wasn’t a mother. She had no idea what it entailed.

Cynthia smiled patiently. “I had to drive Connor to school today.”

“And that took you what? Fifteen minutes?” Jamie looked a bit too smug for Cynthia’s liking. “And then you what? Went to yoga class?”

“Pilates,” Cynthia corrected automatically.

“Pilates,” Jamie nodded. “And now you’re having a champagne lunch with me.”

“I’m not drinking champagne!”

“You were thinking about it though. I saw the way you were eyeing the drink menu.”

“And I decided to abstain.” Cynthia patted her sister’s hand. “For your sake, since you can’t join me.”

“Because I have to get back to work in.... oh, shoot. Is that the time?” Jamie inhaled the rest of her burger in two disgusting bites.

Cynthia flagged down their waiter. “Go. I’ll pay.”

Jamie wiped her mouth and checked her reflection in a spoon. “I can’t believe how late it is. I really wanted to try that brownie thing too.”

“I’ll bring you one.”

“Because you don’t have anything else to do this...” Jamie shook her head. “What am I saying? You’re offering to bring me chocolate and I’m being-”

“A brat?” Cynthia sipped her tea.

Jamie stuck out her tongue. “I’ve been home three weeks and I’m already...” She sighed heavily. “Old habits, man.”

“They’re easy to fall into.”

Jamie grabbed her purse, patted her pockets, and glanced out the window. “Now to find my car.”

Cynthia hadn’t been to the library in years. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been there. When the kids were still kids, probably. Back when Connor had still needed her help to feed his book addiction. Back when that was his only addiction. Back when her biggest worry was whether she should lock his books up at night so he could sleep.

It was comforting to see that the library hadn’t changed much. The computers were newer and the printer was faster but that was it. Cynthia still knew her way around.

She found Jamie in the children’s section, reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to a pack of preschoolers.

“On Friday, he ate five oranges, but he was...” Jamie paused dramatically.

“Still hungry!” the children screamed.

“Right you are.” Jamie turned the page.

A little boy in the front raised his hand. It shot straight up for a moment before his mother forced it down. She offered Jamie an apologetic smile.

Jamie didn’t return it. She cleared her throat and kept reading.

The boy’s hand went up as soon as she was done. “Miss Jamie, how could the caterpillar poop when he was-”

The boy's mother squeezed his shoulder. "Let's go, Brett."

Cynthia watched them leave. "That boy looks like Connor."

Jamie snorted. "And acts like him too. He always has a million questions."

"About poop?"

"Among other things." Jamie held out her hand expectantly. "Where's my brownie?"

Cynthia handed it over. She tried to zip her purse before Jamie could see the inside.

She was not successful.

Jamie's whole face lit up. "You got one for yourself!"

"It's for the kids."

"Sure," Jamie drawled. "For the kids. Because they're so good at sharing."

Cynthia pursed her lips.

"Stick with me and you'll never diet again."

"It's not a diet. It's a way of life."

Jamie laughed into her hand. "No wonder Zoe wants to live with me."

Cynthia's head flew up. "She what?"

"She sent me a picture of some noodle thing you made a couple months ago. She asked if I could adopt her and save her from keto hell." Jamie met Cynthia's stare. "She was joking."

Cynthia narrowed her eyes. "I know."

"I wouldn't take her in anyway. Not unless it was a real emergency. You aren't thinking about eliminating processed foods again, are you?"

"I've been thinking about doing another detox, but that would just be for me, not..." Cynthia leaned back against the desk. "Does Connor want to live with you too?"

She meant for the question to sound light.

Jamie's expression made her think it had been anything but.

"Does he send you pictures of my meals too or is that just Zoe?"

Jamie shook her head. "Just Zoe."

"He texts you though. He tells you things."

“Not as much as he used to.”

Cynthia turned that over in her head. Connor didn’t text Jamie as much as he used to? She didn’t like that. Even the part of her that had always been jealous of Jamie knew that was a bad sign.

“What are you doing tonight?”

Jamie blinked like the question had given her whiplash.

Which was fair.

“Nothing.” Jamie tilted her head. “Why?”

“Why don’t you come over for dinner?”

“Why? So you can make me drink the keto Kool-Aid?”

“I’ll serve something edible,” Cynthia promised.

Jamie picked at her nails while she considered that. “Fine, but only because I’m out of food.” Her mouth twisted to the side. “And I’d like to see Connor and Zoe.”

Cynthia smiled widely. “I’m sure they’d like to see you too.”

Cynthia pulled into the driveway right after the kids.

It was perfect timing.

Perfect for her because she got to see Connor get out of the car.

It confirmed what she’d already known, what she’d hoped she knew. He’d gone to school. He’d made it through the day. There weren’t any messages waiting for her from Ms. Ross.

He could be trusted.

She put on a smile. It wavered when she spotted two teenagers crossing the lawn.

A boy and a girl.

“I like your house,” the girl said to Zoe.

The boy craned his neck to look around the side. “Do you have a pool?”

Zoe rolled her eyes. “Let’s go to my room.”

Cynthia watched them go. She felt like she should’ve said something, asked their names, reminded Zoe to keep the door open. Something.

She turned to face Connor.

He was staring at the door, practically glaring at the door. He did not make any moves to go inside.

“I forgot Zoe was having friends over today,” Cynthia said lightly.

“They’re not her friends.”

Cynthia blinked at him in surprise. “They’re not?”

Connor smiled a smile that wasn’t quite there. “Alana Beck and Jared Kleinman are not Zoe’s friends.”

Cynthia turned the names over in her head. They sounded familiar. Vaguely familiar. Like she’d seen them on a class list once or twice.

And then it hit her.

A suspicion. “They’re in your year, aren’t they?”

Connor nodded stiffly.

“Do you have any classes with them?”

“A few.”

Cynthia patted her purse. “Do you want a brownie?”

“You have a brownie in there?” Connor laughed harder than he had in ages.

Harder than Cynthia could remember him laughing.

The sound of it made her feel warm all over, even though she knew it was at her expense. “I had lunch with your aunt Jamie today. It’s leftover from that.”

Cynthia stared up at the house. Her eyes landed on Zoe’s window. “I guess I should make them a snack.”

“That would be the mom thing to do.”

“Well, I am a mom.” She glanced at Connor quickly. She decided to take a chance. She didn’t expect it to go well. “Can you take it up to them?”

A look of betrayal washed over Connor’s face.

“I can do it,” Cynthia said. “I just thought-”

“They’re not my friends either.”

He said it quickly, simply, like it was set in stone.

“Okay.” Cynthia nodded at the house. “Let’s see what I can whip up.”

Zoe’s door was half-open.

Cynthia decided to count that as a win.

She tapped on the door before opening it the rest of the way. “Knock, knock. Anyone hungry?”

The boy – Jared – leapt off the ground and practically yanked the tray out of her hands.

“Thank you, Mrs. Murphy,” the girl – Alana – chirped. She carefully extracted a piece of cheese from the platter.

It was a wonder Jared didn’t smack her hand away.

“Zoe,” Cynthia said. “Can I speak to you for a moment?”

Zoe looked at her with a mixture of confusion and concern. She immediately hopped off her chair.

Cynthia closed the door behind them. “What are you working on in there?”

She hadn’t meant for it to sound like an accusation, but Zoe obviously took it as one.

“Nothing,” Zoe snapped. She closed her eyes. “A project.”

“For school?”

“Yeah.”

“They’re seniors, aren’t they? I didn’t know you were taking classes with seniors.”

“There are people from all four grades in my music class.”

“So, you’re working on a music project then?”

Zoe’s mouth opened and closed several times.

Cynthia could see the lie forming in her brain. “Connor said he has a few classes with them. I was just thinking if it’s for school, maybe you can ask him to join you.”

“It’s not for school.”

“It’s not?”

“It’s...” Zoe let her breath out in a huff. “We’re just hanging out.”

“You’re just-”

Zoe lifted her hand so she could tick things off on her fingers. “We’re not doing drugs. We’re not having sex. We’re not in a cult or plotting to storm the capitol. We’re just hanging out.”

“Maybe your brother-”

Zoe let out a sharp laugh. “Isn’t Connor a little old for you to be setting up playdates?”

Cynthia closed her eyes. “I just thought...”

Zoe’s expression had softened when Cynthia looked up again.

“I know,” Zoe whispered. “And you know why that won’t work.”

Cynthia did know.

She didn’t say that out loud.

“I should get back.” Zoe glanced over her shoulder. “Thanks for the snacks.”

“And then Bernice said-” Jamie frantically gulped down some water. “Oh. Wow. That got stuck in my throat. I think my life tried to flash before my eyes.”

“Maybe you should be quiet for a minute,” Cynthia suggested as kindly as she could.

“You still won’t tell me to shut up in front of your kids?” Jamie grinned. “I’m sure they’ve heard worse.”

“And said worse,” Larry nodded.

Cynthia ignored them both. “We don’t usually talk this much at dinner.”

“Like father, like daughter.” Jamie turned towards Connor and Zoe. “Our dad – your granddad – always liked to eat in peace. Which in his mind meant total silence. Her mom put up with it, mine didn’t. That’s probably why I developed this whole nervous chatter thing. Silence brings it on.”

Cynthia didn’t have that problem. She’d never had that problem or any of the others Jamie claimed stemmed from being raised by their father. Jamie said it was because they’d gotten their father at different times in his life. Cynthia could see her point, even if she didn’t necessarily agree with it.

Thirteen years was a big age difference.

It was no wonder Cynthia sometimes felt more like Jamie’s aunt than her sister.

“You’re doing that thing.” Jamie jabbed her fork in Cynthia’s direction.

“What thing?”

Jamie looked at Connor and Zoe again. “Does she do it to you too? The squinty eye thing when she’s-”

“Analyzing your every move? Yup.” Zoe very pointedly popped the p.

“I thought it was just me,” Larry teased.

Cynthia threw her hands up. “What is this? The pick-on-mom club?”

The table fell silent.

Connor dropped his fork. “What about when she puts her hands on her hips and her lips do that thing? You know. That thing where...” Connor did an imitation that was a bit too accurate for Cynthia’s liking. “Then you know you’re in trouble.”

“The head tilt-eyebrow raise,” Zoe added. “It’s all doom and gloom when she does that.”

“That’s better than the hand wring.”

“Nothing’s worse than when she asks you to sit down for a minute.”

“I don’t know,” Connor said slowly. “That’s bad but the scary whisper voice is-”

Zoe burst out laughing. She tried to cover it with her napkin but quickly gave that up when she caught Connor’s eye.

He didn’t laugh but a small smile crossed his face. A half-smile. It lasted a second, maybe less.

It vanished the second Cynthia tried to return it.

She stood up without realizing she’d decided to move. She went into autopilot, clearing dishes and promising dessert.

She didn’t realize Jamie was helping her until they reached the sink.

“We’re having fruit, aren’t we?” Jamie sighed.

“Berries and cream.”

Jamie wrinkled her nose. “No chocolate?”

“You had a brownie this afternoon.” Cynthia closed her eyes to avoid Jamie’s glare. “That’s not a comment about your weight.”

Jamie scraped a plate into the trash and held her tongue.

“You look like you’ve lost-”

“Uh-uh, no.” Jamie put the plate in the dishwasher and wiped her hands. “We’re not talking about that. I don’t need you to fix me. There’s nothing that needs to be fixed.”

Jamie wrinkled her nose and tapped her head. “Except in here, maybe. But let’s leave that to the professionals.”

Cynthia scraped the next plate. Zoe’s, judging by the number of peas on it.

“Did I tell you I got a complaint today? Brett’s mother told my boss I read the kids a book that promotes overeating.”

Cynthia let out a startled laugh. “Now that’s ridiculous.”

“I know, right?”

Cynthia folded her arms across the chest. “I’m sorry. I know I always do that.”

“Complain to my boss?”

“Fix things that don’t need fixing. Larry’s always after me about that. He says I do it with Connor. He says it’s not up to me, that Connor just needs to-”

Jamie leaned forward to see why Cynthia had stopped speaking. “Hey! Now it’s a girls’ club.”

Zoe smiled slightly. “Is it okay if I go upstairs? I have homework.”

“Of course, sweetie,” Cynthia said. “Do you want me to bring you your dessert?”

Zoe eyed the fridge warily. “Berries and cream?”

Cynthia nodded.

“I’ll pass.” Zoe spun around when she reached the door. “Dad’s in his study and Connor’s...”
Zoe shrugged. “Just so you know.”

Jamie pretended to examine her nails. “This wouldn’t have happened if you’d served chocolate.”

“Oh, shut up.”

Cynthia fluffed her pillow and leaned back. She didn’t lie down. Not all the way, not yet. “Do you think it’s time to give Connor his keys back?”

Larry didn’t respond.

His eyes never left his laptop.

Cynthia opened her mouth to repeat the question.

He beat her to it. “How long has it been?”

“Three weeks.”

“That’s all? The way Zoe was talking, I thought it’d been over a month.”

“Three and a half then,” Cynthia corrected.

“Do you think he’s learned his lesson?” Larry asked like he already knew, like he thought Connor would never learn.

“I think so.”

“Really?” Larry closed his laptop.

“He’s going to be eighteen soon.”

Larry nodded slowly. “He’s still living under our roof though. Unless he’s planning to move out the second he turns eighteen...”

“Zoe doesn’t like driving him everywhere.”

Larry snorted. “I’ve noticed.”

“We won’t know unless we try.”

“You could help out there, couldn’t you? Take some of the load off Zoe.”

“He won’t like that, having his mother drop him off every day.”

Larry snorted again. “You think it matters to him? You, Zoe, what’s the difference? He doesn’t care about things like that.”

“He asked me to drop him off three blocks from the school today.”

“So he could skip.” Larry shook his head. “Cynthia! You let him skip school?”

“I didn’t let him do anything!” Cynthia took a breath. “He went. He went to school.”

“Are you sure? Did you follow him?”

“He came home with Zoe.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. He could’ve-”

“The school didn’t call me. Did they call you?”

Larry shook his head. “Okay. So, he did one thing right.”

“How about one more week? Then we’ll give him back the keys.”

Larry shrugged and opened his laptop. “I still say you could-”

“I don’t have time to be his chauffeur.”

Larry focused on his screen. He stared so hard it was a wonder it didn’t break. “What did you do today? Anything interesting?”

Cynthia resented the question.

She resented his tone.

She took her time putting lotion on her hands.

“Oh, you know. This and that.” She leaned over to peck his cheek. “I fill my days.”

Heidi

“That’s it. I’m hanging up my stethoscope. I quit.”

Heidi jabbed at her magazine. “Oh, this is such bullshit. Look at this picture and tell me why these people think Emma Roberts wore that dress better than Kristen Bell. It was obviously designed for someone with-”

“Did you hear me?”

Heidi lowered the magazine and met Lauren’s stare. “You know it’s not official unless you tell Denise.”

“I know,” Lauren sighed. She slid down the couch so she could prop her feet up on the table. “You want to deal with a bed pan situation for me? I’ll buy you a Coke.”

“You think it’ll only take a Coke to get me to deal with Mr. Melendez?”

“I didn’t say it was for Mr. Melendez!” She sighed when Heidi raised an eyebrow. “Two cookies, a bag of pretzels, and a Coke. Final offer.”

“Can’t.” Heidi waved her phone victoriously. “My shift ended ten seconds ago.”

Lauren let out an agonized groan.

Heidi tried not to look too smug as she stood up. “Watch out for curtain four. The mom’s an anti-vaxxer.”

Lauren groaned again. “Five’s a conspiracy theorist who thinks her microwave gave her herpes.” She rubbed her eyes like she was trying to go blind. “What is with people tonight? Is it a full moon?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve been in here for fifteen hours.”

“And you’re still hanging around?” Lauren nudged her with her foot. “Go. Go before Denise tries to make it an even sixteen.”

Heidi didn’t need to be told twice. She patted Lauren’s arm as she went by. “Time to go see my kid.”

Her kid was still awake.

She saw that before she entered the house. Evan’s shade was closed, but she could see the glow. The unmistakable glow of his laptop.

She opened the door and went up.

She felt disgusting. Sweaty hair, sticky scrubs, the works. She wanted nothing more than to hop in the shower and sleep for a month.

She went to Evan's room first anyway.

She just barely remembered to knock.

She gave it a minute before going in. Almost a minute. Enough time for him to make himself presentable.

Just in case that was necessary.

She'd learned the hard way it was sometimes.

Evan had turned his lamp on by the time she opened the door. His laptop was closed and his hands were clasped on top of it.

She stared at him for a beat. "You're still up?"

"What time is it?"

"Almost one." Heidi surveyed the room. For what, she wasn't sure. "You have to get up soon."

"In six hours."

"You're supposed to get eight hours of sleep."

"That's a myth, actually." Evan scratched at his neck. "I read that somewhere."

"Were you waiting for me?" Heidi tried to remember if she'd told him what time she'd be home.

She had.

She knew she had.

She was 80% sure.

She didn't ask. She didn't want to know if she hadn't.

Evan shook his head. "I was just--"

"You know you can always stay at Maggie's if you want."

"It's fine. Really." Evan forced himself to smile.

"We can look into getting an alarm if it'll make you feel safer."

"Aren't those expensive?"

“We can afford it,” Heidi said with more confidence than she felt. She made a mental note to do some research, to ask Maggie if she had any connections.

Maggie always had connections.

“I’ll make some calls,” Heidi promised.

Evan didn’t look convinced.

“It’s worth it if it’ll help you sleep when I’m not here.” Heidi’s face lit up. “And it’ll help me next year when you’re gone.”

“When I’m... what?” Evan gulped.

“When you’re in college.”

“Oh,” Evan nodded. “Right.”

Heidi smothered a yawn. “Will you be okay if I sleep in tomorrow?” She wrinkled her nose. “Today?”

Evan’s eyes widened. “Um.”

“You can take the car. I won’t need it until four.”

“Until four,” Evan repeated.

“For class. I’ll need it then.”

“Oh. Right. Um. But there’s this thing at...” Evan closed his eyes. “Four. Sure. I’ll be home before that.”

“This will be good for you. You never get to drive on your own.”

“No, I know.” Evan nodded rapidly. “Yeah. That’s good. Good idea. I’ll take the car. You sleep in.”

Heidi tossed him the keys.

They landed on the bed next to him.

He didn’t even try to catch them.

Because he was tired too.

She told herself that.

Another yawn escaped without warning. She rubbed her eyes and turned around. “Don’t stay up too late now.”

She closed the door behind her.

She heard his lamp click off.

She didn't need to look to know his laptop was still on.

It was almost ten when she woke up.

She couldn't believe her eyes.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd slept that late.

She went downstairs and made her coffee and that was it.

That was all she could make.

They were out of food. Again. She'd been meaning to stop at the store for over a week.

She wondered if she could convince Evan to take over that chore. She laughed because she already knew the answer.

She made a mental note to look into buying groceries online. She made a note to have Evan figure out how that worked.

She did the math in her head. Her class ended at 8:30. She could be at the grocery store by nine, home by ten, in bed by eleven. She could get six hours of sleep before she had to leave for her early morning shift.

It was doable. It was entirely doable.

There was nothing for her to worry about.

She stared out the window while she sipped her coffee.

It took her a minute to grasp what she was seeing.

Her car was still in the driveway.

She called Evan's name as she ran upstairs.

Nothing. No response.

His room was empty. Bed made, backpack gone.

Her keys were on the nightstand.

He must've taken the bus.

She shook her head. She didn't know why she was surprised.

She texted him to see what time he wanted her to pick him up. She didn't wait for a response.

She grabbed her keys and went to the store.

“Heidi?”

She spun around when she heard her name. “Eileen! Hi!”

She reached out to hug her friend.

“I haven’t seen you in ages,” Eileen beamed.

“I’ve been busy.”

“I’ll bet. Are you still in school?”

“Three classes to go.” Heidi crossed her fingers.

“You’ll get there.” Eileen picked up a cantaloupe and examined it. “We should have dinner soon, all of us. Jared can pick your brain about the application process. It’s been eons since I’ve been through it and well.” Eileen sighed heavily. “So much has changed, even since Henry did it two years ago. I don’t know how much more Google can tell me. It’s good thing they’re having that workshop at the school tonight.”

“I don’t know how much help I’ll be, but I can...” Heidi froze when the rest of Eileen’s words caught up to her. “What workshop?”

“The one in the email.” Eileen tilted her head. “The one Ms. Ross sent out the other day.”

Heidi shook her head and patted the pocket where her phone was hiding. “I must’ve missed it. I’ve been so busy I...”

That was no excuse. She knew it. Eileen knew it.

Evan knew it.

She wondered why he hadn’t said anything.

He knew how she was when it came to her email. She hated checking it. It was full of bill reminders and spam. She avoided it as much as possible.

“It’s at 6:30 tonight,” Eileen said. “It’s for seniors and their parents.”

“I have class tonight.”

“Oh.” Eileen shook her head. “Harold and I tried to get it changed. We called them up and said we were hosting a Shabbat dinner. They didn’t care since it’s not a High Holiday.”

“6:30 you said?” Heidi tapped her chin.

She did the math in her head. She could go to the first hour of her class and slip out during the break.

“Is Evan going?” Eileen asked. “We’ll save him a seat.”

Heidi smiled gratefully. “I don’t know. He hasn’t said anything.”

Eileen rolled her eyes. “Jared’s the same. He’s furious we’re making him spend a Friday night at school. Like this is for our benefit.”

6:30.

Heidi stared blankly at a pile of apples.

Who was she kidding? There was no way she could do both.

She had to choose.

“I better go,” Eileen said. “I have a meeting at one.”

Heidi made herself look up. “Maybe we’ll see you tonight.”

“We?” Eileen grinned. “I’ll save two seats then.”

Heidi’s phone rang while she was unpacking the groceries. She answered on the second ring. “Hey Mags.”

“How much do you love me?”

Heidi froze with a bag of chips in her hand. She opened them right away. Experience had taught her it was necessary to consume an excessive number of calories whenever Maggie asked that question.

“Hello?” Maggie barked. “Did I lose you? Ugh. Reception’s crap out here. Let me-”

Heidi devoured a chip in one bite. “I’m here.”

“Oh. So.”

“What did you do?”

Maggie snickered into the phone. “What makes you think I did something?”

“Mag.”

“You remember that guy Tommy I was telling you about?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, so he has a brother.”

“No.” Heidi washed the chips down with orange juice. The taste made her cringe.

“But I already-”

“Maggie! We’ve discussed this.”

“I know, but-”

“I’m not-”

“Ready?” Maggie scoffed. “Heids, it’s been ten years.”

Heidi didn’t say anything.

She didn’t hang up either.

She waited for Maggie to apologize.

“I’m sorry. I’m just saying…”

“I know what you’re saying.” Heidi crunched on another chip. “It’s not that I’m not ready.”

“It’s not?” Maggie let out a disbelieving chuckle.

“I’m busy. I don’t have time for a relationship right now.”

“Who said anything about a relationship? I’m talking about a date. One date. Maybe an overnight one if you’re in the mood.”

Heidi stared at the phone in something that was almost horror. “You have got to find more single friends.”

Maggie guffawed at that. “Just think about it. If Todd looks anything like his brother…”

“I’m going to hang up now.”

Heidi sighed and did just that.

Just as she expected, her inbox was equal parts bills and spam with the occasional school-related email thrown in. She thanked her lucky stars when she saw there was one cancelling her class that night.

It was like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

She didn’t have to choose.

She didn’t have to feel like a bad mother for putting her needs first.

She didn't have to worry about failing out of school because she had a kid.

She took a deep breath and moved on.

She smiled as she checked the box to tell Ms. Ross there would be two Hansens attending the workshop.

Her smile faded when she saw the message from Dan.

She closed her laptop and picked up the phone. It went straight to voicemail.

She wasn't surprised.

"What do you mean the payment's going to be late this month? We talked about this, Dan! We talked about this. You have a responsibility. A responsibility to your son. I-I think it's great you got that swing set the kids want, but... You know what? No. I don't think it's great. I think it sucks. I think you should've picked up the phone and made sure your other kid, your first kid, the one you *abandoned* has enough to eat. Did you think about that? Did you.... This is Heidi, by the way. Call me when you get this."

She hit the red button as firmly as she could.

It wasn't satisfying enough.

She missed her old flip phone. Hell, she missed having an actual phone. A real phone. The kind she could slam into its base.

She leaned back into the cushions and closed her eyes.

Maybe Maggie was right. Maybe she hadn't moved on. Maybe she never would.

Because she couldn't. Because of Evan. Because Evan's existence meant Dan would always be part of her life.

A small part. Smaller every year.

She took comfort in that.

And it wasn't like she was stuck in the past, unable to let go of what she'd had. She'd been on dates since Dan left. She could count them on one hand, but they'd happened.

She wasn't the spinster Maggie liked to see her as.

She really was busy. She worked too hard and studied too much and had a teenager who depended on her.

If she met someone, she met someone. Great. Fantastic. All things good.

And if she didn't, she didn't.

She was enough. Her life was enough.

But still.

Maybe Maggie was right.

She picked up her phone before she could change her mind.

One drink. That's it.

Heidi couldn't believe her eyes.

The line of cars wrapped around the block. She passed it once before she understood what she was seeing.

She was early. School wasn't out yet. Evan wasn't sulking on the stairs, waiting for her.

She took her place at the end of the line and checked her phone.

Dan had Venmoed her a hundred dollars. It was a start.

She didn't bother acknowledging it.

She played Candy Crush until the line started to move. She got to the front and waited.

And waited.

Someone honked their horn.

Evan ran up at the last second. "Sorry." He took a moment to catch his breath. "You're here."

He sounded so surprised something twisted in her stomach.

"I told you I'd pick you up."

"I know," Evan nodded. "I got your text. I just... You're normally not this early."

"It's my day off."

"Oh. Right."

Heidi eased back onto the road. "You could've taken the car."

"I know. I just..." Evan shrugged. "I don't mind the bus. I've gotten used to it."

"I should make you drive home. You're going to get rusty if you don't practice."

Evan dug through his backpack. "No, I know. Next time. I'll take the car next time."

"You're so different from me. I couldn't wait to drive. I drove my parents crazy begging for the car every weekend."

“You had places to go. I...” Evan practically stuck his head in his bag.

Heidi glanced at him quickly. “I ran into Eileen at the grocery store today.”

It took a second for that to sink in. “Jared’s mom?”

“She said there’s some kind of college workshop at your school tonight. I signed us up.”

“Us?” Evan’s eyes went wide. “Don’t you have class?”

“It got cancelled.”

“Oh.”

“I mean, I would’ve gone anyway. To your workshop. It sounds like it’s important.”

“It’s not that important,” Evan muttered.

“It’s about your future. What could be more important than that?”

Evan squeezed his eyes shut. “It’s... I already met with Ms. Ross, so... I mean, it’s fine if you don’t go. If we don’t go. I already-I already know what I’m doing.”

“You know what you’re doing?”

Evan bit his lip. “I think so?”

Heidi snorted. “That was convincing. You want to try again?”

“I... It’s your night off and-” He stared at his hands. “What time does it start?”

“We have to leave at six.”

Ms. Ross was very good at her job. She was funny and knowledgeable and made the application process seem entirely manageable. She knew the answers to most of the parents’ questions and promised to look into the ones she didn’t.

She would keep that promise.

Heidi was sure of it.

She made a mental note to keep a better eye on her email.

She stood up when Ms. Ross announced that they were going to take a short break. She stretched and yawned and tried not to think about the fact that she had to be at work in twelve hours.

She followed Eileen over to the refreshments.

“This has been very informative, don’t you think? Almost worth skipping... Oh, there’s Eli! He has a question about his sukkah.”

And just like that, Eileen was gone.

Heidi was alone.

She tried not to feel too self-conscious as she filled her plate with cookies.

It wasn’t that she was shy. Far from it, really. She had no trouble talking to people. She wouldn’t have lasted a day at her job if she had even an ounce of Evan’s nerves.

It was awkward because she didn’t know anyone besides Eileen and Harold. She’d never joined the PTO, never been a room mother or volunteer. She didn’t chaperone field trips or dances. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d even attended a school event.

She didn’t have the time.

And it wasn’t like Evan was much better. He wasn’t an athlete. He didn’t participate in any of the concerts or shows.

She wasn’t a bad mom who had missed all her kid’s things.

He didn’t have any things.

Which was how she’d managed to make it to his thirteenth year of school without knowing any of the other parents.

She bit into one of the cookies to help herself blend in.

She immediately spit it into her napkin.

Someone started chuckling behind her.

“It’s carob.”

Heidi turned around to look at the woman who was laughing at her.

“The cookie,” the woman said. “It’s carob. I thought I’d try something new.”

Heidi could feel her face heating up.

The woman had made the cookie. Of course, she had.

“Oh, God. Sorry.” Heidi wiped her mouth. “It was good. It was just... It wasn’t what I was expecting.”

“They’re supposed to be really healthy. I can send you the recipe if you’d like.” The woman’s smile grew wider. “That was a joke.”

“Oh,” Heidi laughed.

“I’m Cynthia,” the woman stuck out her hand. “I don’t think I’ve seen you before. Is your child new?”

Heidi shook Cynthia’s hand. “Heidi.” She shook her head. “I’m Evan Hansen’s mother. He’s a senior.”

“We’re all parents of seniors.”

Heidi felt like smacking her forehead. “Right. He’s not new, I mean. He’s been here all four years.”

“Evan Hansen,” Cynthia repeated. “I don’t think I know him.”

“Probably not. He keeps to himself most of the time.”

“Connor does too. My son Connor.” Cynthia waved at someone across the room.

Heidi tilted her head to see. “Is that your son?”

Cynthia’s eyes darted around frantically. “Where?”

Heidi pointed in the general direction Cynthia was looking. It was impossible to tell who she’d waved at.

“Oh. No. I was waving at my husband Larry. He just got here.”

Heidi glanced at the refreshments.

She was surprised when Cynthia didn’t go to join her husband.

“He’s not here. My son.” Cynthia sighed heavily. “He refused to come with me.”

“Mine’s around here somewhere.”

“That’s good. He should be here. He should be taking an interest in this, in his future, in...” Cynthia bit her lip like she’d said too much. “Excuse me.”

Heidi watched her go.

She turned around to study the platters.

She took two more carob cookies to be polite.

“And then the truck explodes like this.” Jared froze in the middle of the sidewalk to mime what a truck exploding looked like. “And then-”

“I thought you said you hadn’t seen the movie yet,” Eileen said warily.

“Wasn’t that what you’ve been whining about all week?” Harold added.

“I haven’t seen it!” Jared yelled. “And now I can’t until tomorrow because you made me come to this stupid seminar. Do you know how many people will get to see it before me? Millions. Billions. Trillions, probably.”

Eileen and Harold exchanged a look.

Heidi couldn’t blame them.

“It’s still early,” Heidi pointed out. “It isn’t even nine yet.”

Jared’s mouth dropped open. He rubbed his hands together excitedly. “There’s a 9:15 showing.”

Eileen and Harold exchanged another look.

“How long is this movie?” Harold asked.

“Only two and a half hours!” Jared jumped forward before his parents could look at each other again. “Please! I’ll be home before midnight.”

“The theater’s thirty minutes away.”

“Not if you drive the way Jared does,” Evan muttered.

Jared stomped on his foot.

“Evan can go with him,” Heidi offered. “Safety in numbers.”

Evan looked at her with something that felt like betrayal.

She didn’t know why.

She knew for a fact he wanted to see the movie. He loved those movies. The superhero ones. He actually followed their plots. He always tried to explain them to her when she got distracted by the actors’ good looks.

“Sure,” Jared agreed immediately. “Evan can come with me.” He smiled at his parents. Smirked at his parents. “Aren’t you always saying I should hang out with-”

“Fine,” Eileen hissed. She shook her head at her son.

Heidi tossed Evan her keys. “Here. Take my car.” She glanced at Eileen. “Can you give me a ride home?”

Jared didn’t wait to hear his mother’s response. He dragged Evan towards the parking lot like he thought his parents were about to change their minds.

It suddenly occurred to Heidi that she should’ve specified that Evan was the one who had permission to drive her car.

Heidi's phone buzzed three times in a row.

She felt like a teenager sitting in the backseat and shielding her phone while her parents bickered about the correct way to hang toilet paper.

Which was what Eileen and Harold were going on about.

Heidi was glad they didn't try to pull her into that debate. She was scared to take sides.

She unlocked her phone and read Maggie's texts.

Her heart sped up right away.

She leaned forward to tap Eileen's shoulder. "Hey. Change of plans."

It was a stupid idea.

A really, truly stupid idea.

Heidi was well-aware of that fact.

She didn't have her car. Her phone was about to die.

She had to be at work in ten hours.

Going to a bar was the last thing she should be doing.

She should have let the Kleinmans drop her off. She should have gone home and taken a bath and gone to sleep at a reasonable hour.

Her mother was right. Maggie really was a bad influence.

She spotted her friend immediately.

Her friend, her best friend, the closest thing she had to a sister. The wild child who refused to grow up.

Heidi envied her more than she cared to admit.

Maggie waved her over. She nudged the guy on her left until he looked up.

Heidi extended her hand. "You must be Todd. I'm Heidi."

Larry

“Brandon from Accounting... you know Brandon from Accounting?”

Larry snorted and kept his eyes on the road. “We’ve met once or twice.”

A day.

For the last decade.

He didn’t think Zoe needed to hear that.

She looked so happy.

“Yeah, so Brandon from Accounting is hooking up with Melody from HR.”

Larry nearly crashed the car. “What? No. There’s no way that’s right.”

“I know what I saw!”

Larry glanced at her quickly. “Brandon? Balding guy about yea high.” Larry stuck his hand out even though he was driving and could not accurately demonstrate Brandon’s height.

“Balding guy with the bow tie?” She laughed at Larry’s expression. “Yeah.”

“Melody’s young enough to be his daughter!”

Zoe wrinkled her nose. “Isn’t she, like, 40?”

“His daughter’s 35!”

“Ew!”

“They’re married. Both of them.”

“Not for long,” Zoe snorted. “I wonder who will handle their divorces.”

“That’s not my area.” Larry didn’t think he’d ever been so happy about that.

“Right,” Zoe nodded. “You mainly deal with corporate cases.”

Larry felt a rush of excitement and possibly pride. Zoe knew what he did. She could tell someone if they asked. She could do something besides shrug and say her dad’s a lawyer.

Connor couldn’t do that.

Cynthia possibly could.

Larry sometimes wondered about that.

Cynthia knew the things that mattered to her, to them, for him. She knew the names of his five biggest clients. She knew their spouses and children. She knew how to entertain.

She didn't know where he kept his paperclips.

She didn't know which pictures he had on his desk.

She didn't know Brandon or Melody or Frank with the earwax.

Zoe did.

And that meant more than Larry had expected.

He concentrated on the road. "Today wasn't too bad, was it?"

Zoe didn't respond right away.

It was enough to make Larry's skin prickle. He allowed himself a moment to gauge her expression.

She was staring at her phone.

That was better than the alternative. It wasn't that she was avoiding the question. She wasn't paying attention. That was par for the course.

He cleared his throat. "So, how about it then? You want to help out again next Saturday?"

"Can't," Zoe said without looking up. "I have a band thing."

"A concert?" Larry cursed internally. He wondered if he had time to rearrange his schedule.

"Bake sale. We're trying to get new music stands."

"Is your mother making something?"

Again with the silence.

Larry snorted when he saw her face.

"I haven't asked her," Zoe muttered. "We need money and-"

"You don't think her carob cookies will sell?"

"I was planning to ask Jamie to make her famous unicorn cookies."

"My lips are sealed," Larry promised.

Zoe smiled gratefully.

"How much do the stands cost?"

Zoe didn't say anything.

The silence felt different that time.

Larry gripped the steering wheel a bit tighter. "I-your mother and I could-"

"No," Zoe said sharply.

"We could make a contribution." He caught the way Zoe's eyes flashed. "A small one."

"That's not who I am." Zoe stared at her hands. "That's not who I want to be. I don't want to be the girl who bought her way into the band."

Larry didn't follow that at all. "But you're already in it."

"Yeah, well." Zoe shrugged and slid down in her seat.

Larry tried to see it from her perspective. "You want to earn things yourself?"

He could respect that. He was the same way.

"It wouldn't be cheating if I buy some cookies, would it?"

Zoe eyed him suspiciously. "How many cookies are we talking?"

"Enough to make life worth living. You've seen our refrigerator."

"I don't think we'll have that many left over." Zoe tapped her chin. "I'll save you three."

"Three?"

"Three," Zoe nodded.

Larry nodded too. He got what she was getting at.

She assumed he wouldn't make it to the sale.

She assumed right.

The case wouldn't be wrapped up in a week. He'd be spending yet another Saturday chained to his desk.

He nearly shuddered at the thought. "So, how'd you like working with Wendy?"

"She's nice," Zoe chirped. "But I think that Felix guy she keeps talking about is actually a cat."

Larry snorted. "I think you're right."

It had taken him years of small talk to figure that out.

It had taken Zoe less than a day.

He was impressed.

“What else did you learn today?”

Zoe tilted her head. “About the case?”

“The case... my co-workers...” Larry grinned.

Zoe considered that for a moment. “You know that guy Tom?”

“I know Tom,” Larry confirmed.

“He’s a misogynistic a-hole.”

Larry considered that for a moment. He glanced at Zoe to gauge how upset she was, to determine how dead Tom was going to be the next time they crossed paths. “I can see that.”

“Does he handle divorces? Brandon should hire him if he does.” Zoe wrinkled her nose.

“Don’t tell Brandon that. I’d hate to give Tom more business. Not that he needs it. Is he really one of the firm’s top earners?”

Larry gave a grim nod. “Yes, unfortunately.”

“He was really laying it on thick with that guy Bob. Is he up for a promotion or something?”

“I don’t know. Probably. It can’t hurt to try.”

Zoe hummed at that. “Bob’s not going to give it to him.”

“Really?” Larry laughed. “You think?”

“I can tell. It’s in the eyes. At the very least, Bob’s going to make him jump through a bunch of hoops first.”

That sounded like the Bob Larry knew. “You picked up on that too, huh?”

“What can I say?” Zoe blew on her nails. “I’m highly observant.”

There was a note on the counter.

Zoe spotted it first because she was highly observant.

She glanced at it and slid it over to him. “Uh oh.”

Uh oh was right.

He was in trouble.

He checked the time. He couldn't make it if he tried. If he wanted to. Which he didn't.

The Watsons were Cynthia's friends, not his. He tolerated them at best. He could never get a conversation going with Gary, which was saying something because he prided himself in being quite the conversationalist. He was an expert at asking questions and making connections and finding common interests. He could do it in his sleep.

Except with Gary.

Gary was a walking, non-talking conversation void.

The only bit they had was that their names rhymed.

Which made their wives think they should be best friends, naturally.

Larry was not at all upset to have forgotten about their dinner.

Cynthia would be, but that was okay. That was a problem for Future Larry. Present Larry just wanted to go watch tv.

He pulled a menu out of the drawer. "You hungry? I'm thinking pizza."

Zoe was staring at her phone so hard it took her a moment to react. "Pizza?"

"With extra cheese and stuffed crust."

"Um, yeah, sure, uh..." Zoe sighed and blinked at the wall. She came dangerously close to dropping her phone.

"Problem?"

"No," Zoe said quickly in a tone that clearly meant yes.

"You want to talk about it?"

Zoe bit her lip. "What time's Mom getting home?"

"You want to talk to her about it?"

Zoe shook her head. "Just calculating how quickly we'll have to devour the pizza."

"I'm not scared of your mother. Are you?" Larry called in their order to prove his point. He added a side of cinnamon sticks because he was in the mood to live dangerously.

Zoe was eyeing the door when he hung up.

He knew that look. "You going somewhere?"

"No." Zoe closed her eyes. "I don't know. There's this thing on the field. Everyone's there."

"Everyone?"

Zoe shrugged.

“If everyone jumped off a cliff, would you?”

Zoe snorted. “It’s not like that.”

“Then what is it like?”

“People are just...” Zoe waved her hand dismissively.

That wasn’t enough information for Larry. He wanted to know what was on the field, who was there, was it chaperoned, was there any chance she’d be brought home by the police.

He didn’t ask those questions.

He didn’t get the chance.

Her eyes flashed like she knew what he was thinking. “Where’s Connor?”

That threw Larry. He didn’t know where Connor was and he didn’t know why she’d asked.

“Why is it always...” Zoe closed her eyes and took a breath. “I check in. I tell you where I’m going and when I’ll be home. I stick to my curfew and I...” She exhaled deeply. “I came home drunk that one time, I know. But that’s it! I...”

“You’re the good kid,” Larry said softly.

He knew what that was like. He’d been the good kid too. He could tell her some stories about her uncle Kevin.

And he would. Someday. When she didn’t look like she was on the verge of a meltdown.

“Then why the third degree? Connor storms out the door and no one bats an eye. I go to a friend’s house and Mom sends me an hourly reminder to be home by eleven.” She glared at the floor. “Is it because I’m the girl? Is it because I’m younger – a whole thirteen months younger?” She rolled her eyes. “Is it because... Do you just figure he won’t listen, so why even try?”

The room fell silent.

Larry gave it a second to see if she was going to go on. “What are they doing on the field? Is there any-”

“No.”

“I didn’t finish my question.”

“Alcohol, drugs, sex.” Zoe ticked them off on her fingers. “Nothing like that’s going on on the field.”

“Would you tell me if there was?”

“No,” Zoe chuckled.

An honest answer.

He could appreciate that.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Zoe blinked.

“Go.”

Zoe didn’t need to be told twice.

“Be home by eleven!”

The door slammed shut.

He couldn’t tell if she’d heard him.

It didn’t matter if she’d heard him.

If history had taught him anything, it was that she would be home by 11:30 at the latest.

The earth was shaking.

Not the earth.

His shoulder. His body. His entire body was vibrating.

He was being shaken awake.

He opened his eyes and immediately rubbed them. He attempted to ask the time.

It came out as gibberish.

Cynthia understood anyway. “11:35.”

Her tone made his skin prickle. “Is Zoe...”

Cynthia glanced over her shoulder.

Larry glanced too.

Zoe was standing in the doorway, shifting from foot to foot.

He studied her face, her expression, her complexion. He tried to tell if she was drunk or high or worse.

Not worse. Not Zoe. Never Zoe.

Cynthia pursed her lips. “She just got home.”

“I’ve been home for an hour!”

“You were in the driveway!”

“I went to get something from my car!” Zoe produced a lip balm from her pocket and waved it in her mother’s face. “Tell her, Dad! Tell her I got home an hour ago!”

Larry glanced between them. He didn’t know what to say.

Zoe narrowed her eyes. “I came in here. I told you I was home.”

Larry rubbed his forehead. “I was asleep.”

Zoe’s mouth dropped open in disbelief. “But-”

“She’s been home since 10:30.”

“See!” Zoe cried triumphantly. Her triumph faded when she realized who her material witness was.

Connor brushed past her and helped himself to a piece of pizza.

“When did you get home?” Larry asked.

“Me?” Connor blinked. “I’ve been here all day.”

Cynthia smacked Larry’s arm. “You didn’t know he was here? Way to pay attention, Larry!”

Zoe took advantage of her mother’s distraction and slipped out the door after her brother.

Larry wished he could go with them. “I was asleep!”

Cynthia rolled her eyes.

“How was the dinner?”

“Good,” Cynthia said tightly. She perched on side of the couch. “Gary says hi.”

Larry closed his laptop and stretched. His eyes gazed longingly at the window.

It was a beautiful day. Perfect golf weather. He wished he had the time.

He wished he had the energy.

The case was taking everything he had.

He couldn't sleep, he barely remembered to eat.

He stumbled towards the kitchen.

Cynthia was standing by the sink. She looked up when he came in. "Well, I'm off."

He nodded like he knew what she was talking about.

"Brunch," she reminded him. "I'm meeting Jamie at the museum."

"You've been spending a lot of time with Jamie lately."

Cynthia's brow furrowed. "She's new to town."

"She lived here her whole life, up until what? Five-ten years ago?"

"She doesn't know anyone. She didn't have friends then, she barely has any now."

"Good thing she has a sister."

Cynthia hummed at that. "Zoe's out. Connor's upstairs."

"Okay," Larry nodded.

Cynthia's mouth opened like she wanted to say something else.

Larry poured himself some coffee while he waited.

"Zoe's at a friend's house."

"Which one? Nicole?"

Cynthia shook her head. "Alana."

Alana.

That was a new one.

Larry was almost certain it was.

"Something's going on there," Cynthia said. "Zoe's hanging out with seniors all of the sudden."

"Seniors?" Larry raised his eyebrows. "Are they... Should we be worried?"

Cynthia shook her head. "I don't think so. I've met them. Alana and the other one. Jared."

"A boy?"

"They seem like decent kids. It's just..."

“I’m not texting her every hour.”

“I haven’t done that in years!”

More like months.

Larry wasn’t about to argue that though.

Cynthia grabbed her purse. “Tell Connor if you’re making something. He hasn’t eaten yet.”

Larry promised he would.

He waited until she was gone to open the fridge.

Cold pizza didn’t count as making something.

Connor emerged around two.

Larry closed his laptop because he needed the distraction. He couldn’t process any more information. His brain felt numb.

He went to the kitchen to reheat his coffee.

Connor was staring blankly at the wall.

Because he was tired or high or both.

It was hard to say.

“Are you just getting up?” Larry asked.

Connor simply shrugged.

“It’s after two.”

Another shrug.

Larry looked him up and down. Connor was wearing a t-shirt and sweatpants. Sleep clothes.

Or possibly not.

He never knew what to make of Connor’s wardrobe.

“Are you hungry? Your mother said I should feed you.”

That broke Connor out of his stupor. He crossed the room to get a pop tart. He didn’t heat it up.

“Are those any good cold?” Larry wondered.

“They’re all right,” Connor muttered.

Words.

Larry could hardly believe it.

“Do you have any plans for the day?” Larry was proud of himself for not mentioning that the day was almost over.

“Homework.”

“Homework?” Larry couldn’t contain his surprise.

Connor shrugged and started for the door.

“Do you need any help?”

Connor let out a barking laugh. “Last time you helped me, I almost failed Pre-Algebra.”

Larry chuckled too. “Right. Well, better than when I tried helping Zoe with her French homework.”

“She got in trouble for that,” Connor grinned. “She cursed her class out in French.”

“Your mother had to smooth that one over.”

Connor turned to go.

“How much homework do you have?”

Connor’s eyes flashed like he was debating how to answer that. A lot or a little? Which answer was safer?

“There’s a new superhero movie out this weekend.” Larry sipped his room temperature coffee. “We can go see it if you want.”

He almost dropped his mug when he heard himself.

He didn’t know what he was saying, why he was bothering.

He hadn’t seen any of those movies in years. Five, at least.

There was a part of him that still saw it as a Sunday thing to do though. A Sunday thing with his son.

He doubted Connor saw it that way too.

“I don’t need you to-”

Larry held up a hand to stop him. “I know you don’t need me to take you. You’d be doing me a favor. If I stare at that brief any longer, I’m afraid my head will explode.”

“Mom will kill you if you ruin the couch. She just had it redone.”

“So, how about it then?” Larry rubbed his hands together.

Connor’s face went blank, totally unreadable.

Larry braced himself for the worst.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Larry could hardly believe his ears.

Connor shrugged.

Larry was 99% sure Connor just wanted to avoid his homework.

But that was okay. He could live with that.

He couldn’t live with the movie’s ending.

It was harsh and twisty and the very definition of a cliffhanger.

At least it gave him something to talk to Connor about.

Something positive. Something that wouldn’t end in a screaming match or stony silence.

They tossed out their theories and favorite quotes as they wound through the mall to the parking lot. It was nice. Strangely nice. Almost like old times.

“I don’t want to go through that again,” Larry decided. He paused and reconsidered. “When’s the sequel coming out?”

Connor didn’t answer.

He didn’t pull out his phone to check.

His eyes were locked on something across the food court.

On someone.

Larry decided that must be the case because he couldn’t imagine why his son was staring at a pretzel stand that intently.

“Connor?”

Connor jumped at his name. He started walking again immediately.

Larry struggled to catch up. He nearly walked into his son when he suddenly threw himself behind a pillar.

Larry stayed put. He didn't know why Connor was hiding. He didn't understand what was happening.

It had something to do with the people passing by. With a woman and a boy Larry assumed was her son.

Connor practically dropped to the floor when they drew close.

"-just one more stop. Maggie wants me to look at the necklace Tommy picked out." The woman paused and spun around to face the food court. "I need coffee."

"You just had coffee," the boy pointed out.

The woman ruffled his hair. "I always need coffee."

And then they were gone.

Connor emerged from his hiding spot and started walking like nothing had happened.

He walked at a normal speed for a change, thankfully.

It was easy for Larry to catch up.

"Do you know them?"

"No," Connor said in a tone that clearly meant yes.

Larry decided not to press.

It wasn't worth it.

He knew when to pick his battles.

Evan

Evan opened the door as carefully as he could. As quietly as he could. He cringed when it squeaked anyway.

His mother was still asleep. She needed to sleep. She had a long shift ahead of her. A long, late shift ahead of her. Her fourth one that week. The budget cuts were wreaking havoc on everyone's hours. His mother wasn't happy about it, but she was willing to take what she could get. They needed the money. And it was only temporary. With any luck, she'd be a paralegal soon. Soon-ish. Within a year or two.

That didn't seem soon enough to Evan, but his mother liked to see the glass as half full.

Even optimists needed their sleep though.

Which was why he really needed to do something about his door.

The squeak was getting worse. He didn't know what to do about it. He could google it, he was sure. There had to be tutorial somewhere. A magical spray that would solve the problem.

Or he could ask his dad.

He wanted to ask his dad.

He wanted to call him up and ask how to fix a squeaky door. He wanted his call to be answered on the first ring. He didn't want to have to leave a message.

He could ask his mom. There was always a chance she knew the answer. She'd taught herself a lot of things over the years. She knew how to replace a toilet chain and change a tire and unclog a drain.

There was always a chance she knew exactly what to do about his door.

Except if she did, she would have done it by now.

Unless she hadn't noticed somehow.

That seemed impossible.

The squeak was almost deafening.

There was something wrong with her ears if she hadn't noticed.

That or she was just busy to the point of being distracted.

That was probably it. She was always distracted. Busy and distracted.

It was enough to make Evan feel like families needed more than two people in them. Especially when one of them was hardly around.

Especially when the other felt like a barely functioning human being.

On a good day.

Which this was not.

Evan was glad he didn't have time to write himself a letter because what would he say?

It was a good day because he still had one clean shirt? So what if it was the puke-colored one his grandmother had given him when he was fourteen and was at least two sizes too small?

It was clean. That counted as a good thing.

Except, no, scratch that, he couldn't pull that shirt off at all. He could barely get it over his head.

It was a good day because he'd grown.

It was a good day because he got to wear his favorite t-shirt again.

It was a good day because he was saving the world by rewearing his clothes until they smelled like a sewer.

It was a good day because he didn't smell like a sewer.

It was a good day because he didn't need to take a shower to avoid smelling like a sewer.

It was a good day because he'd gotten an extra twenty minutes of sleep.

It was a good day because he'd slept through his alarm, thereby preventing himself from having a total panic attack when he realized he'd fallen asleep without finishing his science homework.

It was a good day because he'd only had time to panic for thirty seconds about disappointing Ms. Thomas.

It was a good day because he was going to get his steps in. That was the good part of missing the bus.

It was a good day because it was sunny and nice outside and he got to spend time enjoying it. He got to enjoy it while speed walking to school, but still.

It counted.

Sort of.

He could write an entire letter for Dr. Sherman about how pretty the light shining through the trees looked. He could make it sound hopeful and happy and healthy. He could tell his mom

his therapy letter got a gold star.

She would believe him because she always believed him. She didn't have time to wonder if he was telling the truth.

It was a good thing he was a good kid who didn't do anything, who didn't even have any friends.

His house would've been the party house if he was the kind of kid who had people over every time his mom was gone.

He thought about that sometimes. He thought about what it would be like.

He couldn't imagine what it would be like. Not really. Not unless he imagined a version of himself that was different in every way imaginable.

"Get in, loser. We're going to school."

Evan didn't give Jared the satisfaction of turning around.

He kept walking.

Jared didn't take the hint. He sped up until he could coast along next to Evan. "You know you can ask me yourself if you need a ride, don't you?"

That made Evan pause.

Jared smirked and stopped the car. "Your mom told my mom you missed the bus."

That made Evan freeze.

His mother knew he'd missed the bus? His mother had been awake when he'd left?

She hadn't come out of her room or acknowledged him in any way.

He didn't say that out loud.

He channeled his feelings into the words, "I'm not a loser."

Jared rolled his eyes and unlocked the doors. "I was making a funny."

"That wasn't funny."

"It was if you have a sense of humor."

"I have a sense of humor." Evan focused on fastening his seatbelt. He took a breath and looked Jared in the eye. "You were imitating Regina George. A girl. So, you're saying you're a-a-"

Jared let out a barking laugh and clapped Evan's shoulder.

The car swerved to the right.

Someone honked at them.

Jared flipped them off and kept going. "Nice try, young grasshopper. You know they say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." Jared wiggled his eyebrows. 'And, for the record, Regina George is a queen. A monarch. Her awesomeness goes way beyond the constraints of – oh, this is a good one!"

Jared cranked the radio up.

Evan recoiled at the sound. "What the..."

The music was so loud he couldn't hear himself speak.

Jared couldn't either.

Not that it would've mattered if he could. He was too busy drumming along to the beat to respond.

Evan had never heard anything like it. It was like the composer had thrown a bunch of notes into a blender and set it on high.

"What was that?" Evan managed to gasp the question when the song finally wound down.

"The college station," Jared grinned. "Do you ever listen to it?"

Evan's head was pounding so hard it took him a minute to hear the question. And process it.

Jared's tone was innocent, which meant the question was anything but.

"They have a really good jazz show. You'd like it, seeing as how you're such a fan." Jared snapped his fingers. "Hey, speaking of jazz..."

Evan groaned internally. He knew where this was going.

"What are you doing after school today?"

Evan blinked. That was not what he'd been expecting. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing.

Jared slapped his forehead. "What am I saying? Nothing. I forgot who I was talking to for a second there."

Evan frowned at the window.

"Hey, none of that now," Jared smirked. "You haven't heard my surprise."

Evan's skin prickled. Not good. Definitely not good.

“We’ve been invited somewhere.” Jared turned the radio off for dramatic effect. “To my friend’s house. My new friend. I think you’ve heard of her. Does the name Zoe Murphy ring a bell?”

Evan whipped away from the window. “What?”

Jared cackled with glee. “I told you it was a good surprise.”

“What?” Evan’s whole body felt like it was trembling. “What? How? When?”

“Where? Why?” Jared finished with a nod. “Long story.”

“We have time.”

They didn’t have time. The school was in sight. They had less than ten minutes until the bell rang, less than fifteen until they’d need to report to the office for a late pass.

Evan didn’t care about that. He was not leaving the car until Jared explained exactly how he’d wormed his way into Zoe Murphy’s life.

“Does it matter?” Jared laughed. “I thought you’d be happy.”

“Happy?” Evan sputtered.

Jared turned into the parking lot so sharply they went over the curb. “Zoe told me I could invite someone and you’re the first person I thought of.”

Evan had no words.

“You can bring someone too if you want.”

The faux innocent tone was back. Evan turned to look him in the eye.

“Is there anyone you’d like to bring?”

Evan shook his head.

“No one?” Jared blinked. “A friend? An acquaintance? A pen pal? Someone you share notes with?”

Evan’s stomach twisted at Jared’s tone. He didn’t have to understand what Jared was getting at to know he didn’t like it.

He picked his backpack off the floor. “You can let me out here.”

Jared slowed down but didn’t stop. “You can’t think of anyone at all?”

“Who would I bring?” Evan demanded.

Jared considered that for a moment before nodding slowly. “That’s what I thought.”

Evan squeezed his eyes shut. “Let me out. Please.”

“So, to be clear, you really can’t think of anyone...” Jared shook his head triumphantly. “I knew it! I told Alana you-”

Evan reached for the door like he was prepared to throw himself out of a moving car. “Let me out now!”

Jared rolled his eyes and complied. “Alright, alright, fine. Jeez. You are so weird.”

Evan got out of the car without saying a word.

He tried to shake the conversation off, to chalk it up to Jared being Jared.

The problem was he knew the difference. He knew what it sounded like when Jared was just messing around. He knew not to take it personally.

That had been personal. Jared had meant what he’d said.

He really thought Evan was weird.

A weird friendless loser.

He wasn’t wrong.

The day went by quickly.

Too quickly.

That was always the case when there was something Evan was dreading.

He managed to avoid Jared all day. It was easy since they only had two classes together and Candice Irwin served as a buffer both times.

The end of the day was trickier. His locker was too close to Jared’s for comfort.

He packed up his things and hightailed it out of there as quickly as he could. He didn’t check his phone. He didn’t want to know if Jared was trying to locate him.

He ran downstairs to catch the bus.

He ran right into Alana Beck.

For the third time in a week.

A fact that was not lost on Alana, judging by the look she gave him.

She grabbed her head and groaned. “Ow, okay, seriously, what-”

“I’m sorry,” Evan blurted out.

Alana chuckled to herself. “It’s like we’re magnets or something.”

Evan tapped the side of his head. “Do you have a metal plate too?”

Alana snorted. “Do you need a ride?”

Evan dropped his hand. “What?”

“To Zoe’s. Jared said you might.”

Since when did Jared talk to Alana Beck? Since when did Jared talk to her willingly and about him? Evan couldn’t wrap his mind around it.

Alana started walking like she expected him to follow.

And so he did. Because following her was less awkward than not following her.

“I can only stay for a little bit, so you’ll have to get a ride home with Jared.” Alana dug through her backpack for her keys. “I’m volunteering at the animal shelter tonight. We’re giving the cats a bath.”

“That sounds...”

Alana looked up and met his stare with a grin. “Awful, I know. I’m going to be so scratched up tomorrow.”

Evan glanced longingly at the buses as they passed by. He wondered if he could make a run for it and jump onto the nearest one before Alana noticed. It didn’t matter where it took him. He’d find his way home eventually.

Alana pointed at the parking lot. “My car’s over there.”

Evan followed her through the rows of cars. His eyes briefly landed on every person they passed. It occurred to him that it looked like they were together. Together-together. A pair of friends-together.

It made his stomach ache.

He studied her car while she fumbled with the locks.

Her backseat was filled with posterboards and paint.

She smiled at his expression. “Don’t worry. They don’t have to be perfect.”

“They.... what?”

“The posters.” Alana tilted her head. “For the bake sale.”

“What bake sale?”

“For the jazz band.” Alana climbed in and started the car. “Jared said you wanted to help. He said you’re really into jazz.”

Evan hoped Jared hadn’t said he was into anything else. He focused on his seatbelt so he could hide his face.

“I think that’s so great,” Alana gushed. “I’m trying to learn about it. I feel like there’s this huge gap on my resume. The arts. I’ve never... I can sing well enough, I suppose, in a church kind of way, but I can’t play an instrument or draw anything that resembles anything. I’m starting to think that’s going to hurt my chances.”

“Your chances?”

“Of getting into a good school.” Alana glanced at him quickly. “What do you like about jazz?”

“Uh.” Evan’s mind had never gone that blank before in his life. It would’ve been impressive if it wasn’t so terrifying.

“Do you have a favorite piece?”

Evan closed his eyes and pushed back against his seat.

“Or instrument? Zoe. You know Zoe? We’re going to her house to make the posters. She plays the guitar.”

“I know. I mean...” Every part of Evan that could clench clenched. For the second time that day, he wondered what it would feel like to jump out of a moving vehicle.

“She’s really good!” Alana’s mouth twisted to the side. “I think. As far as my untrained ears can tell, she is.”

“Zoe?” Evan tapped his chin. “The guitarist? Is she the one who sits in the back? Brown hair?”

He stopped himself before he mentioned the color of her eyes.

Alana nodded. “Jared said you’ve been to some of their concerts.”

Evan didn’t want to know what else Jared had said. He really, truly didn’t.

“I’ve been going to them for years,” Alana went on. “My sister Alicia used to be in the band. I never really appreciated it though, you know. It was just this thing my parents dragged me to.”

“Yeah,” Evan muttered.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“No.” Evan cringed. “I mean, yes.”

Alana let out a startled laugh. “You’re not sure?”

“I have two half-siblings. They live in Colorado.”

“Oh.” Alana smiled slightly. “That must be nice.”

“Nice?” Evan coughed.

“Don’t get me wrong. I love my siblings and all, especially my brother, but...” Alana sighed wistfully. “It must be nice to be an only child.”

Evan didn’t know if he’d say that.

Alana smiled like she understood. “And lonely. I bet it’s lonely sometimes, isn’t it?”

Evan simply shrugged.

“My friend Tracy’s an only child. She practically lives at my house.” Alana made a face. “She used to practically live at...” Alana swallowed visibly. “Jared said you’d found someone else to help with the posters. Are they meeting us there?”

Evan jumped in his seat. “Wh-what?”

“Your friend. Are they-”

“No!”

“No, they’re not meeting us?”

Evan shook his head frantically. “I didn’t ask anyone.”

“Oh.” Alana’s face scrunched up for a second. “Do you want to?”

“What?”

“You should,” Alana decided. “You can use my phone if you want, if yours is dead or-”

“I...” Evan scrambled to find the least pathetic way to communicate that he was a weird, friendless loser.

Alana’s mouth formed a thin line. Her eyes flashed like she was putting the pieces together.

It was a relief in a way.

He didn’t have to explain.

He slumped down in his seat and played with his shirt.

They drove the rest of the way in silence.

They set up shop in the kitchen because, according to Zoe, it was the only room they could be messy in.

“Heaven forbid we spill paint on one of her rugs,” Zoe said with a roll of her eyes. She grinned when she met Evan’s stare.

It made him feel warm all over. And not just out of embarrassment.

He forced himself to look away.

Their objective was simple.

Zoe’s bandmates wanted to plaster the school with posters about the bake sale they were having that weekend.

Zoe taped up a paper explaining the specifics – date, time, and location – and encouraged them to make the posters sports-related because there would be a football game and a baseball game taking place that day.

“Our stand’s going to be right in the middle,” Zoe beamed.

“You’re going to make so much money,” Alana sighed. “Whoever planned this is a genius.”

Zoe hummed in agreement.

They got to work.

It was almost fun.

Evan filled his posters with random swirls and doodles. He drew a few circles that sort of resembled baseballs.

Jared kept drawing something that resembled another kind of ball until Alana asked if he was drawing flowers.

They worked in semi-silence.

The girls chatted about a show Evan had never heard of. Jared chimed in in a way that made Evan think he hadn’t heard of it either.

The conversation petered out eventually.

Zoe put the radio on so it didn’t feel awkward.

It took all of Evan’s willpower not to watch her sing along.

Alana left at 4.

Jared left at 4:15.

He left so suddenly Evan didn’t realize what was happening until it had happened.

Jared smirked at him through the window before he practically danced to his car.

Evan mumbled something about needing the bathroom. Zoe pointed in the direction of the stairs.

Evan took them two at a time. He paused on the landing and texted Jared a series of question marks.

He didn't get a response. Because Jared was driving. Because Jared wasn't coming back. Because Jared thought he was being a bro. A friend. A real pal.

He thought he was helping Evan out by leaving him alone with the girl of his dreams.

By stranding him with the girl of his dreams.

Evan's heart felt like it was going to burst and not in a good way.

He froze when he got to the second floor.

There were five rooms up there. Three of the doors were open.

He didn't know what to do.

One of the rooms was clearly Zoe's. It had purple walls and lots of posters. There was a guitar leaning against the bed.

He let himself poke his head in for a second to satisfy his curiosity.

He recognized two of the singers on her wall. He stored that information away for later, just in case.

Her room was neat but not too neat. The bed was half-made. The desk was covered in school supplies. There was a pile of clothes on the chair in the corner.

Evan spun around when he spotted something that he hoped was a bikini top but was probably a bra.

He didn't belong there. He definitely did not belong there.

The next room belonged to Zoe's parents. He was sure of that.

It was like something out of a catalogue. There was a vanity with an assortment of beauty products on it. A huge flatscreen. A plant that looked like it belonged in an arboretum.

There was a bathroom attached to the room, just like there had been in Zoe's.

Evan didn't feel comfortable using that one either.

At first glance, Evan thought the third room was a guest room.

He ran into the bathroom without taking it all in.

He didn't realize his mistake until he went to wash his hands.

There was a tube of toothpaste on the sink, hair in the drain, a towel on the floor.

The room belonged to someone.

Process of elimination told him who.

He shook his hands dry because he was suddenly too scared to even think about touching a towel.

He spun around and ran for the door.

He nearly ran right into Zoe.

Nearly because she wasn't Alana.

At least there was that.

"I thought you got lost," Zoe chuckled.

"I-I did," Evan gasped. He looked everywhere but at Zoe. "Kind of. I mean-"

He stopped himself when he saw the way Zoe was looking around the room.

"Is this..." Evan cleared his throat and tried again. "Is this your brother's room?"

"Connor's, yeah," Zoe nodded.

"Where-where is he?"

Zoe smiled like she found Evan's panic endearing. "I don't know. Somewhere."

"Somewhere?"

"He's not here, in this house," Zoe clarified. "He took off when he heard I had people coming over."

"Oh."

"Yeah, he's weird like that."

Weird.

The word made Evan's stomach twist.

Zoe ran a finger along Connor's desk.

Evan wondered if she was checking it for dust.

She sat down and spun around in his chair. "It looks different."

“Different?” Evan frowned.

“From the last time I was in here.”

“Oh,” Evan nodded.

Zoe took her time examining the walls.

Evan didn’t know why.

There was nothing on them.

Zoe shook her head and slapped her knees. “Okay.”

She stood to go.

Evan followed her out.

He glanced over his shoulder one more time.

He didn’t know why. He didn’t know what he expected to see.

A decomposing corpse? A voodoo doll of Jared? His letter framed and on display?

Nothing.

There was nothing to suggest Connor even lived there. Nothing except a pile of books in the corner.

It made Evan sad for reasons he couldn’t quite grasp.

Zoe was surprisingly easy to talk to.

Very surprisingly. Evan had never really thought about what it would be like to actually talk to her.

Which sounded bad, even in his head.

It wasn’t bad. Not really.

He’d always liked her for reasons other than her looks. He wasn’t that shallow.

She was nice. That much was obvious.

She had an infectious smile and an adorable laugh and...

He really couldn’t think about that while she was talking to him.

Because she was.

Talking to him.

He'd never imagined what it would be like to have an actual conversation with her because he didn't think it would happen. That it could happen. That it could happen to him. With him. With his words.

He laughed at the story she was telling because it was funny.

She was a good storyteller.

He could picture it exactly.

She shook her head dazedly. "Did you have her?"

Evan's laughter cut short. "Have who?"

"Ms. Brennan? Was she your English teacher last year?"

Evan shook his head. "I had Ms. Garcia."

Zoe snorted. "Lucky. Connor had her too. She was the one teacher he actually..."

Zoe hopped off the floor and peered out the window. "Mom's home."

Evan felt guilty for reasons he couldn't quite place. Guilty and nervous. He patted his hair and smoothed his shirt and tried to tidy the mess he'd made.

The door opened and a woman stumbled inside. Evan could barely see her behind the bags she was carrying.

He jumped up to help.

She smiled gratefully until she saw his face. "Hello..." She looked at Zoe uncertainly.

"Evan," Zoe filled in. "I told you I was having friends over."

"Friends," Mrs. Murphy said with an emphasis on the 's.' "I only see one."

"The others left already."

"Oh." Mrs. Murphy started unpacking the groceries. "And what about you..."

"Evan," Zoe snapped. She shook her head at Evan as if to apologize for her mother's existence.

"Evan, right. Sorry." Mrs. Murphy shook her head. "It's been a day." She closed her eyes and it was like a curtain had been lifted. She turned to smile at Evan. "It's nice to meet you, Evan. Are you staying for dinner?"

Evan didn't know what to say.

Zoe beat him to it. “He can’t stay. I was getting ready to take him home.”

Evan followed her lead and backed up. “Yeah. I need to, uh.... It was nice to meet you...”

“Cynthia,” Mrs. Murphy said. “Please call me Cynthia. I think you’re old enough.”

Evan nodded even though he couldn’t bring himself to do that. He had a feeling he wouldn’t be calling her anything for a while. A long while. As long as he could get away with it.

“Is your brother home?”

Zoe froze in the doorway and met her mother’s stare. “No.”

Cynthia’s face clouded over. “Do you know where-”

“How should I know?” Zoe yelped. She nudged Evan’s arm. “We have to go. Evan’s parents are really strict about dinner.”

“Zoe!”

Zoe spun around again. “What?”

“Are you just going to leave this mess all over the kitchen?”

Zoe threw her head back and sighed. “We have to go.”

“It’ll be here when you get back.”

Zoe saluted her mother and nudged Evan forward. Her shoulders drooped when she stepped outside. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine,” Evan muttered.

“It’s not fine.” Zoe fished out her keys. She squinted at Evan’s expression. “You didn’t want to stay, did you?”

“What?” Evan choked out a laugh. “No! Of course not! I, uh...”

Zoe smiled apologetically. “I thought I was doing you a favor. Did you see what was in those bags?”

Evan shook his head.

“Trust me when I say you’re better off.”

“I don’t know. I’m probably having peanut butter for dinner.”

“A peanut butter sandwich?” Zoe rubbed her stomach. “Yum!”

“Except without the sandwich part. We’re out of bread.”

“Oh.” Zoe considered that for a moment. “Do you want to stop at the store?”

Evan couldn’t think of a way to answer that without sounding like the awkward, anxious, socially inept loser that he was.

“It’s no trouble, really.” Zoe glanced over her shoulder at the house.

“My, uh, my mom, she’ll probably go to the store before work tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Zoe nodded. “Okay.”

“And I, uh... I don’t have the list or...” Evan swallowed dryly.

He got in the car and fumbled with his seatbelt.

The radio came on.

A funky, jazzy sort of song was playing.

Zoe turned it up. “This is Alana’s brother’s show!”

Evan nodded like he knew what she meant.

She sang along to the music. It was an instrumental piece, so her words mainly consisted of bees and bops and doos.

If he hadn’t already had a crush on her, that would’ve done it.

It was adorable.

Too adorable. He couldn’t watch.

He gave her directions when they got on the road.

The drive was fast. The Murphys only lived ten minutes away from him.

Who knew?

He hesitated before getting out of the car. “My parents aren’t strict.”

He flinched when he heard himself.

He didn’t know why he’d said that.

Zoe snorted. “Oh, really?”

Evan nodded. “And by parents, I mean my mom. My dad’s gone.”

“Gone?” Zoe’s eyes widened.

“He lives in Colorado now, so yeah. Gone. It’s just me and my mom.”

“And she’s not strict?”

Evan shook his head.

“I stand corrected.” Zoe chewed on her lip. “Do I need to print a retraction?”

Evan blinked. “What?”

“Do you want me to tell my mom or...”

“No. I don’t know,” Evan shrugged. “I just...”

“Okay,” Zoe nodded.

He reached for the door.

She touched his arm.

It made his blood sing.

“Hey,” Zoe whispered. “Thanks for all your help today.”

Evan didn’t have to force himself to smile. “Anytime.”

Connor

Someone had been in Connor's room.

He knew that right away.

How? He wasn't sure.

There wasn't any obvious evidence. His bed was unmade. The room didn't smell like lemons.

That ruled out the cleaning people.

And his mother.

His father was out too. He'd left before Connor had gotten up and was pulling an all-nighter.

Which left Zoe.

He circled his room twice before sitting down at his desk.

Everything was in its place. Nothing had been moved. Nothing had been found.

There was nothing to be found. He made sure of that. It had taken him a while to learn that lesson, but he got it. He knew it was in his best interest to keep things neutral.

No posters. No knick-knacks. No signs of life.

His room wasn't his.

It belonged to his parents. They'd made that clear.

He was lucky they let him have a roof over his head.

He spun around on his chair and he saw it.

A hair.

A long hair. Same shade as his but longer.

Zoe.

It made his blood boil.

It was worse somehow, having proof that she'd been in there, knowing that she'd been at his desk.

Why had she been at his desk?

He couldn't begin to imagine.

He couldn't remember the last time she'd even set foot in his room. She very rarely made it past his dresser.

His dresser.

His nail polish.

That was the last time she'd gone through his stuff.

He'd figured that out right away too. The smell had given her away.

He hadn't said anything because it was worth it. It was worth it when she showed up at the dinner table with black nails.

The looks on their parents' faces had been priceless.

It had been for a costume party, but still. Worth it.

This wasn't worth it.

He didn't have to know what it was to know that.

He jumped off his chair.

He stormed down the hall to Zoe's room before he realized what he was doing.

Her door was half-open. It wouldn't have stopped him if it had been closed. Locked, maybe. Closed, no.

She didn't notice him right away. Her headphones were on. Her comically large headphones that she thought were cool or something.

They were not.

She was staring intently at the book in her lap. She didn't look up until he was next to her.

He dangled the hair in front of her.

She blinked at him like she didn't understand.

Which was fair.

Maybe.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he understood her confusion.

He shoved that aside. "Lose something?"

She chuckled uncomfortably. "What?"

"This was on my chair."

She blinked at him for what felt like an eternity. “Oookay...”

“It’s yours.”

“What?”

“Your hair was on my desk. Which means you were-”

“What, are you a CSI now or something? Look out, world, here comes-”

Connor shook the hair at her.

She reached up to flick his hair. “You sure that’s mine? When was the last time you got your hair cut?”

He smacked her hand away. “What were you doing in my room?”

She didn’t say anything.

That told him everything he needed to know.

“What were you doing in my fucking room?”

She slammed her book shut and swung around so her legs were hanging off the bed.

So he couldn’t trap her in the corner.

“Evan had to use the bathroom.”

She said it quickly, quietly, like it was no big deal.

His hands balled into fists. “Evan?”

“Yeah.”

“Evan Hansen?”

“Yeah.”

“What the fuck, Zoe?”

She closed her eyes and stood up. “I’m going to make some tea. You want some? That Sleepytime stuff will calm you right down.”

“Why was Evan Hansen here?”

“To make posters for the bake sale.” Zoe tapped her chin. “I think I’ll have some ginger tea, actually. That bean thing Mom made is giving me gas.”

She was trying to distract him.

It wasn't working.

"Why-"

"I'm sorry," Zoe drawled. "Since when do I need your permission to have friends over?"

"So, you're friends with Evan Hansen now?"

"Yeah," Zoe shrugged.

"Just like you're friends with Alana Beck and Jared Kleinman?"

Zoe nodded slowly.

Connor narrowed his eyes. He had nothing to say about that.

Nothing and everything.

The pendulum in his brain was stuck on nothing.

Except...

"What were *you* doing in my room?"

Zoe rolled her eyes. "Are you high? We literally just went over this."

He hated that. He hated that reasoning. It was a cheap shot. An easy way out.

And it wasn't true. Not really. Not every time he heard it. Sometimes. It wasn't true as often as his family seemed to believe. Wanted to believe. Chose to believe.

He buried that thought. He made his face go blank. "You're not my answering my question."

"I already-"

"Why aren't you answering it? What were you doing in my room? Did you go through my stuff? Did Mom ask you to go through my stuff? Does she have you do her dirty work when Dad's not around?"

Zoe choked out a laugh. "Are you listening to yourself? What-"

"Why were you in my room?"

"Evan had to use the bathroom."

"That doesn't explain why *you* were in there."

Zoe bit her lip. Her brain was working overtime to come up with an excuse.

Connor couldn't stand it. He couldn't stand any of it. The lies, the spies, the hair on his chair.

“Evan got lost!” She spat the words out like she knew he was on the verge of exploding.

“He got lost?” Connor mimicked.

“Yeah,” Zoe shrugged. “He was gone for a while, so I went-”

“You let him go upstairs alone?”

“What was I supposed to do? Ask if he needed help?”

“Why’d he use my bathroom? What’s wrong with yours?”

“I don’t know,” Zoe muttered.

“Did you tell him to use-”

“No!”

Connor wasn’t sure if that made it better or worse.

“I thought he’d use the powder room.” Zoe rocked back on her heels. “No one went through your stuff.”

“Then why were you at my desk?”

Zoe’s mouth opened and closed.

Her silence said a lot.

“What were you looking for? What did you find? What-”

“Oh my God,” Zoe groaned. “Would you get over yourself? You’re not that interesting!”

She looked him in the eye when she said it.

He laughed.

Really laughed. Genuinely laughed.

It made her mouth twitch into a smile. “Well, you’re not!”

“Tell that to Mom and Dad.”

“They made you. They’re genetically predisposed to finding you interesting. The rest of us just think you’re... I wonder what it would taste like if I mixed ginger and Sleepytime together.”

“What?”

“The teas.” Zoe took a step towards the door. “I wonder what it would taste like if I-”

“The rest of you think I’m what?”

Zoe bit her lip.

Her silence spoke for her.

It wasn’t enough.

Connor took a step forward. “You were saying something. Why don’t you finish saying it?”

“I...”

“The rest of you think I’m what?”

Zoe’s face went blank. She kept her eyes focused on the door. “You know what you are.”

She said it quietly. Almost softly.

She slipped past him before he could ask for clarification.

He thought about going after her, about stopping her on the stairs and demanding answers, about screaming until their mother intervened.

He didn’t have the energy for that.

And it wasn’t worth it.

He knew what he was.

“Connor! Last call! You’re going to be late!”

The doorknob shook ominously, but his lock held.

He held his breath and waited.

“Zoe’s gone. I have to be at the library in twenty minutes. If you want me to take you, you need to-”

“Who says I want you to take me?”

There was a pause while his mother considered that.

“How else are you going to get to school?”

“Who says I’m going to school?”

There was a thumping sound that made Connor think his mother had thrown herself at the door.

The thought of that made him snort.

“Open this door this instant!”

Connor sighed and obeyed.

She did a double take when she saw him. “You’re dressed.”

“Yup.”

“So, you’re planning to go to school then?”

Connor shrugged.

His mother pressed her forehead. “We’re not your enemy, sweetie. You have to meet us halfway.”

Connor stared at the floor.

His mother checked her watch. “I’m supposed to be at the library in fifteen minutes.”

“I thought you said twenty.”

“It’s fifteen now.”

“This wouldn’t be a problem if you gave me back my keys.”

His mother frowned at that. “We were planning to give them back this week.”

That was news to Connor. “You were?”

“Were being the operative word now. This little stunt you’re pulling makes me think you’re not-”

“I’ll be downstairs in two minutes.”

“Make it one.”

He sat up straight in the car. He kept his eyes facing forward. He didn’t sulk or look at his phone.

He sniffed his jacket as subtly as he could.

It only smelled faintly like weed.

That was as good as it was going to get.

His mother smiled like she knew he was making an effort. “I like that shirt on you. It brings out your eyes.”

He didn't know what to say to that. He decided to change the subject. "Why are you going to the library?"

His mother glanced at him in surprise. "I'm volunteering there now."

"You're volunteering?"

"I do a lot of volunteer work. You know that."

"But the library? Why the library?"

"Your aunt Jamie thinks I sit around all day, eating bon-bons."

"And watching soap operas," Connor nodded.

"She told you that?" Cynthia shook her head. "I'm going to..." She glanced at him quickly.

"When did she tell you that?"

Connor stared at the road.

"It's fine that she did, even though I wish she wouldn't say things like that to my children." She muttered that last part under her breath. "I'm just wondering. Was it at dinner last week or..."

"I saw her at the library."

"You went to the library?"

His mother looked like she was so happy she could melt.

He eyed the steering wheel. He was prepared to grab it if his next words made her faint. "I've been volunteering there too."

She stopped the car.

She didn't even pull over. Just stopped in the middle of the street. She put her hazards on when someone honked.

He picked at his shirt self-consciously. "What?"

She chuckled to herself. "You really want your keys back, don't you?" Her eyes widened at his confusion. "You're serious? You've really been volunteering at the library?"

He slid down in his seat. "Ms. Ross thought it would be a good idea for me to--"

"Ms. Ross? You met with Ms. Ross already? What did you do?" She took a breath. "It can't be that bad if they didn't call us."

"I didn't meet with her," Connor muttered. "I... I ran into her after school and..."

He shrugged.

She beamed. "You talked to her about your college applications?"

Connor pointed at the clock. "I'm going to be late."

"I'll write you a note."

"You're going to be late."

She wrinkled her nose. "Jamie can survive without me."

She drove forward anyway.

The smile didn't leave her face.

"Pair up, team up, you know the drill. First group to come up with the answers gets a sticker."

Someone whooped in the back of the room.

A few students chuckled.

Chairs scraped and people chattered as Connor's classmates sorted themselves out.

Connor didn't join in. He stared at his worksheet intently.

Someone plopped into the seat next to him. "You want to team up for old times' sake?"

Connor shrugged without looking up.

It was too early for Alana Beck.

It was always too early for Alana Beck.

He would've made his mom stop for coffee if he'd known he'd be teaming up with Alana Beck.

"The first one's easy," Alana said.

Connor nodded in agreement. It was. Even he knew that one and science was by far his worst subject.

"This second one though..." Alana made a face at the sheet. She glanced around the room and waved at someone up front.

Her hand fell as quickly as her face.

"Tracy asked Evan to join her group."

Connor watched as Evan turned his desk around so he could work with Tracy Jacobs and her boyfriend.

That was a relief. He didn't know what he would've done, what he would've said, if Evan had joined their group.

He changed the subject before Alana could comment on his expression. "You're not working with them?"

"No," Alana said shortly. She cleared her throat. "Let's come back to the second one. The third one looks more doable."

They exchanged papers when they were done.

Alana's answer looked right.

Connor's was barely in English.

She smiled tightly. "We'll just hand mine in then."

"Just like old times."

She snorted and wrote his name next to hers. "So, how've you been? I feel like I never see you anymore."

"You see me," Connor snapped.

He didn't know why he was so offended, but he was.

He'd been to school every day. He hadn't skipped once.

They were only two weeks into the school year, but still. It was something.

Alana's eyes widened. "I know. I *see* you. I just meant I don't see you-see you. Not like this. Not like... I was at your house the other day. You weren't there."

"Why were you at my house?" Connor dropped his pencil. "Why do you keep coming to my fucking house?"

Alana smiled uncomfortably. "To see Zoe."

Connor gave her a look.

"She's really cool, you know. She's really-"

"Everyone loves Zoe."

"People would love you too if you'd let them."

She said it like it really was that simple.

And then she moved on. "I think I saw the answer to number four in one of those charts she gave us. Let's see..."

Connor flipped through his notes too.

He only pretended to look.

Evan put his sticker on his cast. Because of course he did.

Right in the middle of one of the O's.

Tracy giggled and did the same to the other O.

Her boyfriend stuck his on his forehead. It was a lightning bolt sticker. Because of course it was.

Alana scowled at them. She openly scowled at them for a minute before her eyes went wide.

She whipped around to glare at Connor.

Not glare.

She wasn't upset with Connor. She wasn't upset they'd lost.

She'd seen his name.

She'd noticed it.

It was like a light bulb had gone off in her head.

Her brain was working overtime to process what it meant.

Connor hightailed it out of there before she could ask.

"This changes everything. I can't believe I didn't see it before! There must be something wrong with my eyes. Or my glasses. It's my glasses' fault! I need to go see Dr. Warner. I must need a stronger prescription."

"I didn't see it either," Zoe whispered. She glanced over her shoulder like she had sensed her brother's presence.

Connor took a step back just in time.

She frowned and turned back to the computer. "I didn't notice it and I notice everything!"

"I think he keeps it hidden. Covered. He was wearing a jacket the other day, even though it was 90 degrees outside and the AC was on the fritz. I remember thinking that was weird."

"Can you blame him?" Zoe snorted. "He has my brother's name on his--"

She whipped around again.

Connor wasn't fast enough that time.

She stood up without saying a word and closed the door in his face.

So that was that then.

It was a relief in a way.

It had been like waiting for the other shoe to drop.

He hadn't had to wait long. Three hours. That was it.

He wondered who would try to broach the subject with him first – Zoe or Alana?

Or possibly Jared.

He couldn't rule that out.

He tried to look on the bright side. It gave him something to look forward to. Something to dread.

Sometimes it really was the little things that kept him going.

Sometimes it was the little things that kept him up at night.

Sometimes he tossed and turned and agonized about the fate of the universe, the meaning of life, his very existence.

Other nights he just felt twitchy. Restless. Like he couldn't stay still.

Those were the nights he regretted getting rid of his things. That was the problem with making sure his parents had nothing to find. It seriously limited his options.

He could only page through his books so many times.

He could only spend much time staring at his ceiling.

He could only check the weather app on his phone. That was the only one he trusted himself to use in the middle of the night when he was tired and restless and unlikely to remember to clear his history.

Because that was the key.

No history. No trace. Nothing for them to find.

Nothing inside. They never thought to look in the hole under his window.

His whole world behind a broken shingle.

What a sad, pathetic world it was.

It was easier that way. Better.

Safer.

He hadn't realized how many things he had to hide until they started looking.

And they were always looking.

He sat up when the ceiling started to move.

It wasn't really moving. He was with it enough to know that.

He was just that tired.

He was just tired. It was all natural. No weed involved.

He weighed his options.

He could sneak outside, sit on the roof, and smoke or vape until his brain felt floaty and numb.

He was too tired for that. He'd have a bad reaction if he tried. He'd fall off the roof and die.

And that would be bad.

He was with it enough to get that.

Steve from The Sharing Circle would be so proud.

He went downstairs.

He went to the living room. He could watch tv in there as long as he remembered to leave it on PBS when he was done.

They couldn't draw any negative conclusions from that.

The light was on.

He froze when he realized that. He glanced over his shoulder and considered making a run for it.

He was too slow.

His father didn't look nearly as surprised to see him as he was to see his father.

"*The Golden Girls*?" Larry grinned. He fumbled with the papers in his lap as he attempted to stretch.

"What?" Connor blinked.

"That's your late night show, isn't it? Yours and Zoe's."

Connor simply stared.

"You can't sleep, so you come down here to watch--"

"I don't know what I'm going to watch!"

Connor hated how defensive he sounded.

He hated it even more than the fact that his father was right.

The Golden Girls was his go-to late night show. His and Zoe's, though he hadn't realized that was still the case for her.

Larry waved his hand at the tv. "Go ahead. The noise won't bother me."

Connor sprawled out on the ottoman and turned the tv on. He didn't go straight for *The Golden Girls*. He took his time getting there.

He rolled over when a commercial came on. "What're you working on?"

"A case," Larry said automatically. His brow was furrowed when he looked up. "Why?"

Connor shrugged and turned back to the tv.

"Do you want to help?"

Connor snorted and shook his head.

"Zoe's been helping me."

Connor shrugged again. "Good for her."

"I told her she should think about becoming a lawyer. Or maybe something in research. She has a knack for it."

Connor stared blankly at the tv.

"I don't know though. She doesn't sound like she knows what she wants to be yet." Larry cleared his throat.

A danger alert went off in Connor's head.

He was too tired to do anything about it.

“What about you? Do you know what you-”

“No.”

Connor turned the volume up. Not much. Just enough to give his father a hint.

He didn’t take it.

“Are you still thinking about majoring in English?”

Connor’s eyes flashed. “When did I say that?”

Larry sucked in a breath. “I just assumed you-”

“Because I like to read? Because I used to read all the time? Because-”

“Because you’ve read *The Song of Achilles* 40 times,” Larry finished. “Maybe something with mythology then. I don’t know what kind of career you’d have though.”

“It’s not 40,” Connor mumbled. “Ten, maybe.”

Larry hummed at that. He leaned forward to jot something down on his notepad.

“What do you think I should do?”

Connor cringed when he heard himself.

He couldn’t help it though.

And he couldn’t blame it on the weed.

“You told Zoe what she should do. What do you think I should-”

“You want my opinion?”

Connor stared at his hands.

He didn’t and he did.

His father didn’t say anything for a minute. A whole minute. He cleared his throat.

Connor looked up.

His father had put his papers down. He was staring at Connor intently. “I think you can do whatever you want to do.”

That landed with a sting.

Connor sat up. “Because I do whatever I want? Because I-”

“I think you can be whatever you want to be.” Larry fiddled with his papers. “I’ve always said that.”

“You’ve never said that.”

“Well, I’ve thought it then.” He glanced up again. “It doesn’t matter to us, you know. We just want you to be happy. To pick a path and be happy.”

“What if I don’t want to pick a path?”

“Then you better marry rich.”

Connor snorted.

Larry laughed.

The Golden Girls had cheesecake.

Alana

“Soooo, let me get this straight. You think Evan and Connor were lovers.”

Alana rolled her eyes. “I didn’t say it like that.”

“Lovers, lovers, *lovers*,” Jared sing-songed. “With all the love. So much love. Love and sex and oh my God, Evan’s had sex. You think Evan *Hansen* had sex with Connor *Murphy*. That’s wrong on so many levels. Oh my God. You have no idea how wrong that is.”

“Because they’re both guys?” Alana snapped.

“Because...” Jared let his breath out in a huff.

“I didn’t think you were the kind of person who’d have a problem with-”

“I don’t have a problem with *that*!” Jared yelped. “I have no problem with... you know. Gay people or whatever. Love is love. Sex is sex. As long as it’s consensual, you do you. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“Zoe.”

“What about her?”

“You haven’t noticed?” Jared’s face lit up.

He looked like a cartoon villain.

Alana didn’t have time for that. “Noticed what?”

“Evan has a thing for Zoe. More than a thing. He’s obsessed.” Jared wrinkled his nose. “Not in a scary stalker sort of way. Just...”

“He has a crush?”

“You could say that.”

“So...” Alana sighed.

“If he’s been screwing her brother... I’ve heard of people having a type, but that’s kind of ridiculous, don’t you think?”

“I didn’t say they were lovers.”

“You said you thought they’d broken up or something.”

“Friends can break up too.”

Jared’s face lit up again. “Like you and Tracy?” His grin widened when their eyes met. “What? You didn’t think I’d noticed you aren’t attached at the hip anymore?”

“We were never attached at the hip,” Alana scoffed.

Jared smiled and shrugged like he was humoring her.

It made her skin prickle. “I’m just saying it’s an explanation. It would explain a lot of things if they had a falling out and-”

“He would’ve told me.”

“What?”

“Evan. He would’ve told me if he’d been palling around with Connor Murphy.”

“Because your moms are friends?”

“Que?” Jared tilted his head.

“Evan would’ve told you because your moms are friends? That’s what you keep saying, isn’t it? You’re not friends. You’re family friends. So, what makes you think Evan would tell you anything?”

Jared was stunned into silence. It wasn’t as satisfying as Alana would’ve expected.

He recovered with a smirk. “Because he tells me everything.”

“Obviously not.”

“He does,” Jared insisted. “He doesn’t have anyone else.”

“Except-”

“He doesn’t have Connor Murphy! Not now, not ever. Not in any way imaginable.”

Alana raised her eyebrows at the shrillness in Jared’s tone. “Do you tell him everything?”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“I have people. Friends. He-”

“Who?” Alana demanded. “Who are your friends? Evan’s the only person I ever see you with.”

“Then obviously you’re not paying attention!” Jared looked away. He glared at the window.

Alana took a breath. "I'm just saying it's possible Evan-"

"I would know!" Jared didn't sound nearly as certain as he had before.

"Okay." Alana rocked back on her heels. "Okay, so-"

"You think Evan and Connor were super-secret best friends who had a falling out?"

"That would explain why Connor's name is on his cast."

"Not if they were trying to keep it a secret." Jared snorted. "That thing's like a billboard."

"You didn't notice it either!"

"I have better things to do with my time than worry about what's going on with Evan's body!"

"It was right there! In big block letters!"

Jared's jaw twitched. "Yeah, well."

"So, you see how it could be possible for Evan to-"

"Evan was not super-secret best friends with Connor Murphy! I'll eat a shoe if he was."

"A shoe?"

"A tough one. Muddy. I'll add salt to make it go down easy."

"I'm going to hold you to that," Alana said with a nod. "I better go. I'm volunteering at the senior center tonight and I need to finish my homework first."

Jared made a face. "Homework..."

She opened her mouth to ask if he wanted to study together.

He walked away before she could.

Doing homework at home was a luxury.

It hadn't always been that way. There had been a time, back before Alice and the kids moved back in and Alicia became a woman of leisure, when Alana could spend hours in her room without anyone interrupting her.

That ship had sailed.

It was gone.

Long gone.

Alana didn't even have a room anymore.

She had a basement. A dark, damp, depressing basement with a washer and dryer that never stopped running.

Because kids were dirty. They went through an insane number of clothes and sheets and towels. Alana really didn't want to know what the twins were doing with all those towels.

She loved her niece and nephew. She loved spending time with them and being their aunt.

She wasn't ever going to have any of her own. Not that way. Through adoption, maybe. She could picture herself taking in all kinds of strays. Dogs, cats, kids.

She could do that. That would be a good use of her time.

Following in Alice's footsteps would not.

She was on track to be the only one of her sisters to graduate with honors. Nothing was going to ruin that.

Not even a home that could no longer handle homework.

It was impossible to concentrate when chaos was reigning. And that was saying something. Alana prided herself on her ability to focus even amongst the toughest circumstances.

Even she had her limits though.

She hated to admit that, especially when her sisters were doing everything in their power to distract her.

"Are you just going to sit there like a log or are you going to help us with dinner?" Alice jabbed a spoon in Alana's direction.

Alana very pointedly turned a page. "I'm studying."

"Go study in the living room. You're taking up counter space."

"The twins are in there."

Alice shrugged like that wasn't her problem, even though it very much was. They were her kids, her responsibility.

Alana swallowed that thought. She didn't feel like being accused of being an uncaring aunt. Again.

"Where's Tracy?" Alicia popped her gum after she said it.

Alana flipped another page in her book.

It was pointless. She wasn't absorbing any of the material.

She refused to give her sisters the satisfaction of seeing her quit.

Alicia leaned into Alana's space. "I haven't seen her in ages."

"She was here last week."

Alicia tilted her head. "She was?"

Alana turned another page.

There was a basket of dirty laundry at the top of the stairs. That was the only keeping her from fleeing to the basement.

Alice frowned at her phone. "Two cloves of garlic? Mom puts more than two cloves in her sauce."

"Mom uses two heads of garlic." Alicia popped her gum. "So, what's Tracy?"

Alana waved her pen at Alice. "Don't use two heads. Four cloves should do it."

Alice didn't look convinced.

Alana hoped they had Tums.

Alicia rested her chin on her hand. "Tracy would know how much garlic we should use."

Alana snorted at that. "Tracy forgot to put sugar in my birthday cake."

Alice squinted at the stove. "Does it always take this long for the water to boil?"

Alicia looked Alana in the eye. "Tracy would know."

Alana snorted again. "Why are you so obsessed with Tracy today?"

Alicia popped her gum.

Alana knew better than to think that meant the Tracy talk was over. She took a breath and highlighted something at random.

"I heard she's a cheerleader now."

Alana's shoulders stiffened against her will.

Alicia picked up on that right away. "I heard she's going out with that football player John what's-his-name."

"Rickard," Alana filled in automatically.

Alicia's eyes flashed triumphantly.

She didn't say a word.

“Yeah,” Alana shrugged. “So?”

“Soooo.” Alicia spun around and leaned against the counter. “Are you going to get in on that?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...” Alicia wiggled her eyebrows at Alice. “Is Parker Lyons still single?”

Alice’s mouth dropped open. “What about Kyle?”

“What about him?” Alicia blew on her nails.

“You two aren’t together anymore?”

Alana rubbed her forehead and studied the page while her sisters communicated in a series of squeals and shrieks.

Alicia suddenly plopped onto the stool next to her. “So, do you think Tracy can hook a sister up?”

It took Alana a moment to get that. An embarrassingly long moment. “You’re interested in Parker?”

Alicia snorted and exchanged a look with Alice. “You could say that.”

“Isn’t he a little young for you?”

“Young?” Alicia’s mouth dropped open. “We’re the same age!”

“He’s-”

“He repeated eighth grade! He’s my age!”

Alana decided not to touch that.

“Maybe Tracy can find someone for you too,” Alice said in her most diplomatic tone.

Alicia snorted and then laughed. She cracked up like Alice had said something truly bizarre.

Alana’s heart sped up. She stared at her textbook so hard she was surprised it didn’t burst into flames.

Alicia tapped her chin and pretended to think. “That’s not a bad idea, actually. How about Felicity? The cheerleader with the purple hair? Rumor has it she’s-”

“Licia!” Alice hissed. She made a slashing motion with her hand.

Alicia snorted and zipped her mouth.

Alana closed her book and stood up. “I need to get going.”

Her sisters didn't look surprised.

Alana didn't leave right away.

It was too early to go to the senior center.

And she really needed to finish her homework. It would eat at her all night if she didn't.

She joined the twins in the living room because they were watching *Frozen*. Again. Because it had the power to hypnotize them into silence.

It had that effect on her too sometimes.

She got lost in *Let It Go*, the most relatable Disney song until *The Next Right Thing*.

The sofa sagged when it was over.

Alicia.

She popped her gum. "What time are you leaving?"

"Seven," Alana said.

"On a school night?" Alicia pretended to gasp.

Alana stared at the tv. "They're having a program on the-"

"Can you give me a ride?"

Alana whipped around to blink at her. "To the senior center?"

Alicia rolled her eyes. "To school. My car's making a weird noise."

Alana's mouth twitched. It had to be bad if Alicia had noticed. "Why do you have to go to school?"

Alicia bristled at that. "None of your-"

"Which school?"

"What do you mean which school? My school."

Alana simply stared.

"My school. Franklin. The one I'm taking classes at."

"You're taking classes?" Alana couldn't have kept the surprise out of her voice if she'd tried.

Alicia's eyes flashed. "And working full-time, but you didn't know that, did you?"

Alana hadn't known that. She couldn't have hidden that if she'd tried.

Alicia picked at her nails and stewed for a minute. "I know it's only a community college, but-"

"That's great, Lish. Really. What are you studying?"

"Gen ed," Alicia shrugged. "I might transfer later." She popped her gum. "It was Alan's idea."

Another surprise.

It made Alana's head spin. Not that her brother had given good advice. Alan was known for his good advice. His radio show was just the icing on the cake.

It was weird that he had given it to Alicia.

He barely talked to Alicia.

Or so Alana thought.

Had always thought.

There were four Beck siblings. Two inseparable pairs.

Alana wondered when Alan had talked to Alicia. She wondered how often they talked outside of the sibling chat.

She wondered what else she was missing out on.

Alicia choked on her gum. "So, are you taking me or not?" She made a face when Alana didn't respond right away. "Please take me. I don't feel like begging Fi for a ride."

"Fine."

"And you'll ask Tracy about.... you know?"

Alana's jaw set. She shrugged and flipped a page.

She didn't know why she was bothering. She wasn't absorbing anything.

It was a good thing her GPA could survive an off-night.

"Felicity's cute."

Alana closed her book. She stared at the tv and silently willed the twins to throw a fit.

Something, anything, to cause a distraction.

They gave her nothing. They were totally engrossed by a cartoon they'd seen a dozen times.

It figured. The one time she wanted them to embrace their inner brattiness...

“I mean, not in a I-want-to-do-her kind of way, but-”

“I don’t want to do Felicity!”

The twins whipped around to stare at her.

Alana rolled her eyes.

It figured.

She waited until Olaf was back on the screen. “I’m not interested in Felicity.”

“What about Jocelyn? She’s got to be bicurious at least.”

“I’m not...” Alana chewed her lip. “I’m not interested in seeing anyone right now.”

“Right now?” Alicia snorted. “Try ever.”

“It’s not a priority for me. All that can wait.”

“For what? Until you’re a partner at your law firm? Who do you think will want to go out with you then?”

Alana swallowed the urge to ask who would want to go out with her now.

Alicia fished out her phone. “I think I have Tracy’s number in here somewhere.”

“Don’t!” Alana cried.

The twins whipped around again.

Alana smiled and hummed along to the music.

“Fine,” Alicia grunted. “But only because you’re giving me a ride.”

They drove to Franklin in silence.

Not the comfortable kind.

Alana focused on the road.

Alicia focused on her phone.

It was a relief when Alicia got out. It was an even bigger relief when she did it without saying anything.

Alana didn’t ask if she needed a ride home. She was sure she’d hear about it if she did.

She thought about calling Alan, but then she checked the time and realized he was hosting his show.

She flipped over to the college station.

“--easy on yourself. You’re not perfect. No one is. You can only do so much. You can only be you. You are the only one who can. Don’t worry about what your sister, what anyone, is doing. Take a break once in a while. And, hey, if you figure out how to do all that, let me know. I could use some of that too.”

Alan laughed. The listener chuckled.

Alana smiled.

The advice portion of Alan’s show was definitely better than the jazz.

She wondered if he knew she was listening, if he’d sensed it somehow.

He’d said those words to her more times than she could count.

She sent him a quick *good show* text when she pulled up to a red light.

She didn’t wait for him to respond. She put her phone away and kept her eyes facing forward.

Ms. Ross would be so proud.

She got to the senior center early. Not as early as she would’ve liked but that had been a given the second Alicia asked for a ride.

She helped Bonnie set up the tables and put out the punch. She organized and reorganized the cookies until she was happy with her design.

And then she waited.

She wished she’d brought her homework with her so she could give it another go. She scrolled through her feed instead. Mindlessly scrolled.

Alan would be so proud.

She looked up when Bonnie came back with the people from the library. And promptly dropped her phone.

She scrambled to grab it and check for scratches.

She sighed when there were none.

Bonnie motioned for her to come over.

She swallowed her shock and did just that. She kept her eyes on Bonnie and the woman she assumed was the librarian.

She did not look at Connor Murphy. Or, rather, she did but just long enough to see if he was looking at her.

He was not. His eyes were bouncing around the room in a surprisingly alert way.

Bonnie started towards the door. “Alana will show you where to set up.”

Alana smiled and led the way.

Connor was not part of the presentation.

That wasn’t a surprise. Not really. Except it did make Alana wonder why he was there.

She didn’t ask. She scrolled through her phone until she ran out of things to stare at.

She put it down and blinked at the librarian.

Jamie. Her name was Jamie. Connor’s aunt Jamie.

Alana wasn’t sure if she needed to know that.

She didn’t have to stick around after the lecture. Bonnie had recruited Ray to help take everything down.

She really should’ve brought her homework. At least then she would’ve felt like she was being productive.

She should’ve picked another night to volunteer at the senior center. Sitting around doing nothing felt like a waste of time.

She couldn’t even ask Lucille about her pet parakeet.

She smiled and waved when Lucille caught her eye.

The movement made Connor look up.

She seized her chance. “What are you doing here?”

It came out as a hiss. She’d meant for it to be a whisper.

She softened her expression.

Connor didn’t notice. He tapped something on his phone.

“Volunteer hours.”

“What did you do?” Alana cringed when she heard herself. “I mean-”

“I know what you mean,” Connor snapped.

Alana stared blankly at the slide Jamie was describing. “I’m volunteering too.”

“What did you do?”

Connor was smirking when she looked at him. Alana’s mouth twitched into a smile. “It’s for school. You know we need to do-”

“75 hours of community service to graduate.” Connor picked at his nails. “I would’ve thought you’d finished that freshman year.”

“I did. This is for my resume.”

Connor snorted.

“And, you know, to make a difference.” Alana waved at Miles and Natasha.

Connor raised his eyebrows. “Friends of yours?”

“Yeah, sort of.”

“You’re friends with old people?”

Alana frowned at how funny Connor found that. “They were friends with my grandmother. She died in July and...”

Alana shrugged.

“How old was she?”

“86.”

“That’s old.”

“Not old enough.”

Connor shifted around next to her. “I can’t imagine being that old.”

“You can’t imagine shuffling around with a cane and one of those old man hats? I bet you’d be cute.”

Connor didn’t respond.

Alana tilted her head to gauge his expression, to see how her comment had landed. She hadn’t meant anything of it. She wondered if he thought she had, if he thought she thought he was cute or...

He was cute, she supposed.

She wasn't an expert on those things.

On boys and their cuteness.

Which made her sisters think she was gay.

She never bothered correcting them. She wasn't sure if they were right, but she was sure they weren't wrong. Not entirely.

She was gay or bi or ace or a really late bloomer.

She'd figure it out eventually.

It wasn't a priority for her.

Her phone buzzed.

There was a text from Tracy, the first one in days.

You like Felicity???

Alana flipped her phone over.

She was going to kill Alicia.

Connor looked away quickly.

Too quickly.

Like he'd seen the text.

Alana folded her arms across her chest. "We can always use more volunteers here, if you need to rack up some hours."

Connor shrugged noncommittally.

"They're having a fall festival here next week. I might ask some other people to help out too. Jared, Zoe... Evan."

Connor gave her a look.

She'd been expecting it. "I didn't realize you two were so close."

"We're not."

"You signed his cast."

"So?"

"So..." Alana sucked in a breath. "Your name is all over it. Literally. Like-"

“Did Zoe tell you about the letter?” He said it like he was trying to catch her off-guard.

It worked. Sort of.

“I told her.”

That had been the wrong thing to say. Alana knew that immediately. She closed her eyes.

“You... Was that before or after you read it on the fucking-”

Alana shushed him automatically.

“Can they hear us?” Connor laughed. “Aren’t they all deaf now or something?”

“Not all of them.”

Connor snorted. “How did you get the-”

“I found it, okay?” Alana took a breath. “I’ve been trying to figure out who wrote it and-”

“Who wrote it?”

“Yeah,” Alana said slowly. “Whoever wrote it needs help. That letter was screaming for it.”

“You don’t think Evan was...”

“I don’t think Evan was what?”

Connor’s lips were zipped.

“It shouldn’t be this hard! It’s not like he has that many friends.”

Connor stared blankly at his aunt.

Alana stared at her hands. “At one point, I wondered...” She chuckled to herself. “I kind of wondered if you might have... you know.”

“You thought I wrote it?”

Alana shrugged. “Maybe.”

“I didn’t.”

“I know that now.”

And she did.

She was sure of that.

As sure as Zoe had been from the start.

Connor hopped off the table.

His aunt needed his help with a prop.

“Let me know if you figure it out.”

Alana’s eyes went wide.

He was gone before she could promise she would.

Zoe

Zoe couldn't shake the feeling that she was forgetting something.

She felt her pockets. She felt her bag. She spun around to face her locker like doing that would trigger something deep inside her brain.

Nothing.

She had no idea what she'd forgotten.

She had no idea if she'd forgotten something.

It was entirely possible the feeling was all in her head.

It was entirely possible that she was being extra-paranoid because she was heading into the weekend and wouldn't have easy access to her locker and junior year was kicking her butt.

Already.

She hadn't expected it to happen this fast.

She'd expected to make it through the first quarter at least without feeling like she was drowning.

Not drowning. That was an exaggeration.

It was just harder than she'd thought it would be.

She wondered if everyone else felt that way too. It was hard to tell. She felt like she was floating around in her own little bubble, totally disconnected from her classmates.

Her conversations with her friends were limited to lunch breaks and the group chat.

And that was her fault. She knew it was. She knew she could be doing more. Should be doing more. She should go to Jenny's and watch *Glee*.

She didn't have the energy for that.

She had homework to do. On a Friday night. Because that was her life.

She blamed Alana. She'd never felt the need to get her homework over with right away so she could enjoy her weekend before Alana Beck entered her life.

That was what Sunday nights were for.

She ran through her classes in her head. She dug through her backpack and checked off her assignments one at a time.

Chemistry notes, check.

Algebra book, check.

The Great Gatsby, check.

Everything present and accounted for.

And still there was that feeling.

She chewed her lip and closed her eyes and gave up.

And that was when it hit her.

Connor.

That was what was missing.

Not missing. Not exactly.

Connor wasn't missing. He was gone. Long gone. Their parents had finally returned his keys. He wouldn't have stuck around while she was at practice even if they hadn't. He'd have found his way home somehow.

He was very cat-like that way.

Zoe had always wanted a cat. Or a dog. Or a hamster.

She wasn't picky.

She just wanted something furry to cuddle.

Her parents had a strict no pet policy. It was her mother's doing. She knew that for a fact. She'd come annoyingly close to convincing her father on more than one occasion.

Her mother refused to budge. She didn't want to get stuck cleaning up after a pet.

Which was fair.

Probably.

Possibly.

Possibly not.

Zoe had had a goldfish once. She'd kept it alive for an entire month all on her own.

It had died suddenly, under what her seven-year-old self had deemed mysterious circumstances.

She'd blamed Connor at the time.

Part of her still did.

The sound of laughter greeted her when she entered the kitchen.

She smiled when she saw the reason.

Her mother and Aunt Jamie were drunk. Wine drunk. Very wine drunk from the looks of it.

Jamie's face was flushed and her mother was dressed for a party.

Something clicked in the back of Zoe's brain. She gripped her bag and weighed her options.

Her mother looked her up and down. "Is that what you're wearing?"

"What do you mean?"

Her mother nodded at the stairs. "You still have time to change."

"Change?"

"For dinner." Cynthia shook her head in disbelief. "With the Harrises. It's been on the board all week."

It was there. Zoe didn't need to look to confirm that it was there. She'd been hoping it was a parent dinner, not a family one.

She hadn't asked. No good could come from asking. She'd just shoved it aside and carried on like it wasn't happening.

Jamie raised her eyebrows at her sister. "That's where you're going tonight? I thought it was a work thing with Larry."

"Why'd you think that?"

"Because..." Jamie gestured at the wine. "You need to pre-game before going to dinner with friends? What kind of friends make you feel like-"

Cynthia focused on Zoe with an intensity that made her twitch.

"What about that plaid skirt I bought you? You can wear that with your cream sweater."

Zoe instinctively looked to her aunt for her help.

"You look pale." Jamie blinked at her sister. "Doesn't she look pale?"

Cynthia leapt forward to feel Zoe's forehead. "You don't feel warm. Let me see your throat."

“Does your throat feel scratchy?” Jamie rubbed her neck for emphasis. “Connor said there’s something going around your school.”

Zoe swallowed sharply. “Uh, yeah, I don’t know, maybe. This girl in my chem class kept sneezing today.”

Cynthia’s eyes went wide. “I’ll get the robber’s blend.”

She took off like a shot.

Zoe glared at her aunt. “Great. Now my room’s going to smell like cinnamon for days.”

“I just got you out of dinner with the Harrises. You should be thanking me!”

Zoe made a face. “Thank you.”

“Robber’s blend? Is that-”

“An essential oil? Yup.”

“My sister’s become one of those women who thinks she can-”

“Use oils to cure everything from splinters to colds?” Zoe nodded vigorously. “She saw something about it on Facebook a couple months ago.”

Jamie rubbed her forehead and sighed.

“Connor tried convincing her that his weed is just an upgraded version of her CBD. He almost got away with it until Dad came home.”

Jamie snorted at that.

Zoe covered her grin with a cough when her mother returned.

“The diffuser’s all set up.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Zoe croaked. She cleared her throat for dramatic effect.

And then she slipped out of the room before her mother could get the flashlight.

It didn’t take long for the robber’s blend to take over the house.

Zoe gagged on it when she stepped into the hallway. It was even worse out there than it was in her room.

Because it was coming from three rooms. Hers, Connor’s, and their parents’ – just in case.

She hoped her mother hadn’t bought a fourth diffuser for downstairs because she really wanted to eat without drowning in the smell.

She knocked on Connor's door on a whim, without actually thinking about it.

He opened it right away. The look on his face suggested he was acting without thinking too.

"Hey..." Zoe's eyes darted around aimlessly. "I'm going to make some soup. You want some?"

"Soup?" Connor chuckled. "Are you actually sick?"

"No, but Mom will know something's up if we eat something else."

"Not if we bury the evidence."

"Where? In the backyard?"

"That was one time!"

"How high were you to think that would work? The dirt was literally--"

Connor closed the door in her face.

"So, is that a no to the soup?"

Cynthia was too hungover to question her daughter's miraculous recovery the next morning.

It was enough to make Zoe giddy with relief.

She didn't have to sneak out. She could leave for the bake sale in peace.

Her mother only had one request.

She asked for the music to stop.

Zoe sent her brother a text before she ran out the door.

"That guy keeps staring at you." Nicole popped her gum and pointed across the lawn.

Zoe tried to see what she was seeing, but it was impossible. There were too many people.

Dozens of people.

And they all wanted to purchase baked goods.

She narrowed her eyes at Nicole. "You're supposed to be helping."

"I am helping." Another pop. "I put out more cookies."

“Brownies. I asked you to get the brownies.”

Nicole made a face. “You’re no fun when you’re stressed.”

“You volunteered for this,” Zoe reminded her. “You asked me if you could help.”

“Because I never see you anymore.”

“You see me plenty.”

Nicole scoffed at that. “Yeah, right.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“We’re all busy. We missed you at Jenny’s last night.”

“Did she make you watch *Glee*?”

“She tried. Maya and I staged a hostile takeover.”

Zoe smiled at the thought. “I bet that went over well.”

“It didn’t,” Nicole chirped. She helped herself to a cookie.

Zoe added it to her tab.

The tab she knew she’d end up covering.

She knew Nicole saw it as her reward for helping a club she wasn’t in.

“The brownies,” Zoe reminded her.

Nicole rolled her eyes and hopped off the table. She elbowed Zoe as she went past. “That’s him. That’s the guy.”

Zoe turned to see.

Evan and Jared were at the front of the line.

She opened her mouth to explain, to tell Nicole it wasn’t like that. They were her friends. Her new friends.

She stopped herself just in time.

Explaining that would mean explaining the letter. Or not explaining the letter and leaving a gap in the story that would make Nicole hound her for days.

She stepped up to the counter and told Sydney she’d take over for a bit.

Sydney didn’t need to be told twice.

Working the line during half-time was a nightmare.

Zoe regretted it immediately. She forced herself to smile. “Hey! I didn’t know you guys were coming.”

Jared looked at Evan expectantly. He rolled his eyes when Evan stared at his shoes. “Of course, we came! We wouldn’t have missed this for the world!”

He looked at Evan again. And rolled his eyes. “Evan’s been talking about it all week.”

“I-I have not!” Evan squeaked.

He glared at Jared with the widest eyes Zoe had ever seen.

It was sort of terrifying.

Zoe could feel her smile slipping. “So... what can I get you?”

“Get us?” Evan yelped.

Jared shook his head in disgust. “Two brownies. To go.” He handed Zoe a five dollar bill. “Keep the change.” He turned to smirk at Evan. “Anything to help the jazz band, right?”

Evan nodded rapidly for a moment before turning on his heel and practically running back to the game.

Jared winked at Zoe before following after him.

Zoe motioned for the next group to come forward.

“There he is again!” Nicole whipped around with her middle fingers in the air. “What are you staring at? Go look at-”

“Nicole!” Zoe smacked her friend’s arm. She gave Evan and Jared the most apologetic smile she could manage. “Ignore her.”

“Ignore me?” Nicole shrieked. “Doesn’t it bother you when creepers stare at-”

“He wasn’t staring!”

“You didn’t see what he was doing! He was-”

“He’s my friend!” Zoe took a breath. “They’re both my friends.”

Nicole stopped in the middle of the parking lot.

Right in front of an angry dad who was trying to leave.

She flipped him off when he honked.

“Friend?” Nicole hissed. “Since when are you friends with-”

“Could you keep your voice down?”

“Why?” Nicole shouted. “Am I embarrassing you?”

“Little bit, yeah.”

They snickered when their eyes met.

That was the best part of being best friends with Nicole.

Their arguments always rolled right off of them with no harm done.

“Jenny and I are going to go bug Maya at work tonight. You in?”

Zoe shook her head. “I have homework.”

“I thought you were doing homework last night.”

“I have to finish my homework.”

“That’s what Sundays are for.” Nicole grabbed her arm. “Come on. Play with us. I’ll buy you an ice cream cone.”

“After all the cookies you ate, you owe me a sundae.”

“See! You have to come so you can collect your debt!”

“I’ll think about it,” Zoe promised.

Nicole sighed heavily, but she didn’t protest.

She knew that was as good as it was going to get.

“It’s a good idea!”

“It’s a terrible idea!”

“It’s his eighteenth birthday. We have to do something!”

“But a surprise party? What about our son makes you think he’d appreciate a surprise party? Who would you even invite? He isn’t in elementary school anymore. We don’t have a class list.”

“I can get one,” Cynthia insisted. “I can-”

Zoe couldn’t believe what she’d walked in on. “Are you throwing Connor a surprise party?”

“Zoe can help!” Cynthia beamed. “She’s friends with seniors now! She can get their addresses!”

Zoe glanced at her father.

He shook his head as subtly as he could. “How was the bake sale? Did you save me any leftovers?” His hands flew up defensively. “My diet! I know!”

“Your heart,” Cynthia reminded him. “You aren’t getting any younger.”

Zoe set the container on the counter. “I’m just going to leave this over here.”

Her father winked at her.

She flashed him a smile before turning to face her mother. “A surprise party? You think that’s a good idea?”

“It’s a terrible idea!” Larry maintained.

Cynthia ignored him. “It doesn’t have to be a big one. Small. Just a few of his classmates. Alana would come, I bet. She was just telling me how she used to be Connor’s lab partner.”

Zoe didn’t know what to say.

Alana would come if she was asked. Zoe was sure of that.

She was also sure that the party was one of the worst ideas her mother had ever had.

“Why don’t you just cook Connor’s favorite meal?” Zoe suggested. “Like really cook it.”

Cynthia folded her arms across her chest. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means with real ingredients,” Larry grinned. “Sugar, salt, gluten, fat.”

Cynthia closed her eyes. “I don’t know.”

Zoe pointed at the door. “I’m going to go finish my homework.” She hesitated a moment before adding, “And then I’m going to Ducky’s. Maya’s working tonight.”

“Are you staying for dinner?”

Zoe tilted her head to examine the stove.

Her father read her mind. “Three bean casserole.”

“I’ll get a burger at Ducky’s.” She continued on before her mother could protest. “With a side salad instead of fries.”

In addition to fries.

She knew better than to say that out loud.

She passed Connor's door on her way out.

She hesitated before knocking. She thought about it.

She decided she owed it to him, to all of them, for everyone's sake.

He answered on the second knock. "What?"

"Do you have plans next weekend?"

He simply stared.

He was too stoned or tired or surprised to glare.

"For your birthday," Zoe clarified. "Do you have plans?"

His brow furrowed. He went to slam the door in her face.

"You might want to make some," Zoe said quickly. "Mom's trying to throw you a surprise party."

He froze with his arm in the air.

She waved merrily. "Good night!"

She practically skipped down the stairs.

She didn't laugh until his door slammed shut.

Jared

Jared glared at his phone with the intensity of the sun.

It shivered in his hand. Quivered. Practically melted.

In his mind, it did.

In his mind, this was a movie magic moment. The music was swelling, the cars were swirling, the people were blurring.

The camera was focused on him and him alone while he frantically tried to figure out where his friend had gone.

Friend-friend.

A movie magic moment like this would never be wasted on a family friend.

Someone honked.

It snapped Jared back to reality.

He moved out of their way without looking up.

He tried Evan again.

It worked. Finally.

Evan answered on the second ring.

Two rings, four calls, no texts.

There was no time for texts when someone disappeared like that.

“Dude,” Jared chuckled. “Seriously? Where are you? One second you were right behind, the next... poof! You-“

“I’m in the bathroom,” Evan whispered.

He whispered it so softly Jared wasn’t sure he’d heard him right.

“You’re what?”

“Bathroom,” Evan hissed.

Jared laughed again. “You’re in the bathroom? Why didn’t you say something?”

“i-”

“You gotta warn a guy before you take off like that. You gotta say something. You gotta say, ‘excuse me, kind sir, would you mind waiting for me while I go drop some kids in the pool?’”

There was a pause while they both drowned in horror at what Jared had just said.

“Drop some-”

“It’s a thing my dad says,” Jared said-not-shrieked. “You’re fast.”

“Fast? What?”

“You should join the track team or something. You...” Jared wrinkled his nose. “Please tell me you’re not shitting yourself while we’re talking.”

“I’m not-why would you say that?”

Jared grinned so hard it hurt. If his voice came out a bit louder than necessary, then so be it. “Why would I ask if you Evan Andrew Hansen-”

“That’s not my middle name.”

“It’s not? Huh.” Jared cleared his throat. “Evan Thomas-”

“Nope.”

“Evan Michael-”

“Not even close.”

Jared huffed into the phone. “Evan Hansen – that’s Hansen with an E, in case you’re wondering.” He winked at the girls passing by. One of them was giving him some major side eye. “Why would I ask if you, Evan Hansen with an E, are having explosive di-”

The call ended.

Jared snickered triumphantly.

His triumph was short-lived.

No one was watching. No one was listening. No one was amused by his routine.

They didn’t get his humor.

They would someday.

College. People would get him in college.

He was sure of that.

He pocketed his phone and started searching for his car.

It wasn't a long search. The parking lot was emptying out quickly.

He leaned against the hood and contemplated texting Evan for an ETA. He decided to let the guy poop in peace.

It was the least he could do.

He wondered if there was a subtle way he could mention that to his parents.

Forget subtle. He needed shoes and he needed them soon. He needed to play it up. Make it sound like he'd wiped Evan's butt.

Nope.

That was too far, even for him.

Going to the game with Evan had to be worth at least half a shoe. It was a start.

He'd get the rest eventually.

He always did.

He heard Alana before he saw her.

Before he half-saw her.

He could only see half her face behind the pile of boxes she was carrying.

She rolled her eyes when she spotted him and nodded at the girl walking with her.

The girl paused and tilted her head. "Oh. Did you need help?"

"Oh, no," Alana drawled. "Don't worry about me. I'm used to carrying my weight in boxes."

Jared sprang forward to take one from her.

It was too bad his parents didn't know Alana. This had to be worth at least an eighth of a shoe.

The girl put a hand on her hip. "You should've said something."

"I thought it was obvious!" Alana narrowed her eyes. "I'd blame it on our parents, but I turned out okay."

The girl shook her hand in a so-so way.

Alana closed her eyes. "How was the game?"

"Game?" The girl blinked.

“The game,” Alana repeated slowly. “You didn’t go, did you?”

“You didn’t either!”

“I was working on a display with Ms. Ross. What’s your excuse?”

“I was helping with the bake sale!”

Alana burst out laughing.

“What? I was!”

Alana spun around to face Jared. One of the boxes wobbled precariously. “You stopped by the booth, didn’t you?”

Jared nodded reluctantly.

“Did you see her?”

Jared kept his mouth shut. The only thing scarier than one Beck sister glaring at him was two Beck sisters glaring at him.

“I was more of a behind the scenes kind of person,” the girl admitted. She snapped her fingers all of the sudden. “I remember you though. You were with that guy!”

“What guy?” Alana demanded.

“The one who was creeping on Zoe!”

“Evan?” Alana said automatically.

The girl’s face lit up. “So, you know who I’m talking about? Is he always like that?”

Alana glanced at Jared. “Did something happen?”

“Some girls thought Evan was staring at Zoe while we were in line,” Jared muttered.

“It was weird!” the girl shrieked. “Like Lifetime movie weird. Like-”

“Alicia,” Alana hissed.

Jared glanced over his shoulder.

Sure enough, there was Evan.

He looked like he was a half second away from bolting back to the bathroom.

“I’m sure it was nothing,” Alana said quickly. “I do that sort of thing all the time. I get lost in thought and... I don’t know. It probably looks like I’m staring at...” She chuckled to herself. “This one time in math class, I zoned out for a bit and all the sudden I realized I was staring right at Mr. Delaney’s crotch. Like right at it. Like it’s a wonder he didn’t say something.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Alicia insisted. “It was weird. It was-”

Alana fixed her with a look. “Take that box from Jared. We need to go.”

Alicia rolled her eyes and reluctantly complied.

Jared went back to his car.

He froze when he saw Evan’s face.

He knew that face.

That wasn’t the face of someone who’d been dropping some kids in the pool.

That was the face of someone who’d been hiding.

It was the face of someone who was regretting everything in their life that had led to the moment they’d felt the need to run and hide.

It was a face he was familiar with.

He’d seen it on Evan more than once. More than more than once. Countless times.

He kept his eyes down while he unlocked the car. “You good?”

He looked up in time to see Evan nod.

“That was my street!”

Jared jumped. Not just at Evan’s tone. It was the first thing Evan had said since they’d left school.

He’d almost forgotten that he wasn’t alone. Almost. Not quite.

The anxiety buzzing off Evan was like static. Impossible to ignore.

“You have to turn around. That was my street!”

Jared sat up a bit straighter and shook his shoulders. “Would you relax? Take a breath. Enjoy the scenery.”

The scenery was a traffic circle and an angry-looking pigeon.

Evan was too wound up to notice.

“If you take the next right, you can-”

“I’ve been instructed to bring you with me.”

That was news to Evan. His mouth dropped open. “Instructed by-”

“Your captors, obviously. I’m taking you to the drop point so they can...” Jared rolled his eyes. “My parents. You’re having dinner at my house.”

“Oh.”

“So’s your mom. She didn’t tell you?”

Evan shook his head.

He pressed his forehead against the window again.

Jared nodded to himself.

Point taken.

Conversation over.

Jared kicked a sock under his bed and scanned his room as subtly as he could.

It wasn’t that he felt the need to impress Evan.

It was that he needed to bury the evidence.

There was always evidence. Something he’d really prefer to keep private.

He hoped the dirty sock was the worst of it. He was sure it wasn’t. There was something lurking in the depths of his room that would ruin him if it got out.

At least it was just Evan. Who would listen to Evan if he tried to say what he’d found?

“That’s Henry’s,” Jared said automatically.

He didn’t know what Evan was staring at. He didn’t want to know.

And there was always the possibility that it really was Henry’s.

He didn’t have it in him to touch Henry’s side of the room. For hygiene reasons, mostly. And because he valued his safety. Henry still half-lived there and was prone to making random appearances. The amount of laundry he produced was impressive.

Evan didn’t say anything. It was a bit unnerving.

Jared decided two could play that game. He sat at his desk and started messing around on his laptop. He didn’t look up until his mother shouted for him.

He did a double take when he saw that Evan was perching on the edge of his bed. The very edge. It didn’t look comfortable.

Evan didn't seem to mind. His eyes were glued to his phone. He didn't budge when Jared swept past.

Jared bounded down the stairs so quickly he suddenly understood what his mother meant when she said he sounded like a herd of buffalo sometimes.

He came to a skidding, rug-ruffling stop when he reached the living room.

His father was the only one who looked up. He quirked an eyebrow and took a sip of his beer.

Beer?

Jared tilted his head to make sure his eyes weren't playing tricks.

"Jared!" his mother shouted. She chuckled when she saw him standing there. "There you are!"

Jared's mouth twitched as he looked between his parents.

They were drunk. Not drunk-drunk. Kleinman drunk. Which was normal person tipsy.

Evan's mother was a bad influence.

Who knew?

She smiled and gave him a small wave.

His mother did her best to shift into her trademark all business mode. "Which teachers did you say are writing your recommendation letters?"

Jared took a step back. "I didn't?"

His mother's eyes flashed.

He resisted the urge to tell her to finish her drink.

"We talked about this. You were going to ask... what's his name? Your computer teacher."

"Mr. Johnson," Jared mumbled.

"You need to get on that!"

"I have time!" Jared said-not-shrieked.

"At least he's thinking about it," Heidi smiled. "That's more than I've gotten from Evan."

A wave of gratitude washed over Jared.

He wondered if Heidi could be his mom too.

She was totally wasted on Evan.

“Jared can help him!”

Jared raised his eyebrows at his mother.

She pretended not to notice. “They can ask their teachers together. It’ll be less overwhelming that way.”

“I don’t need Evan’s help!” Jared gasped.

Something flashed across Heidi’s face.

Jared’s stomach dropped.

He wasn’t that oblivious. He knew his mother’s suggestion hadn’t been for his benefit.

She knew he could take care of himself.

It was for Evan.

It was always for Evan.

Talk to Evan. Be his lab partner. Make sure he has a seat at lunch.

Story of Jared’s life.

College would be different.

Unless he got stuck at the same school as Evan.

He turned towards Heidi. “Where’s Evan applying? He hasn’t said.”

Heidi sipped her drink like she hadn’t heard him. Or like she was trying to stall for time.

It was hard to say which.

She fished out her phone. “What do you think about this dress?”

It took Jared a solid second to realize that wasn’t aimed at him.

His mother leaned over to see. “For the dinner party?”

Heidi nodded. “Todd said it’s business casual.” She shook her head dazedly. “I’m so out of the loop. I don’t even know what that means these days.” She tapped her chin and pretended to think. “I’m guessing it means I shouldn’t show up in my scrubs.”

“Well, you could, but I’m not sure that’s the impression you want to make.”

Both women laughed.

Jared managed a smile.

His father's hand twitched like he was itching to grab the remote.

His mother stood up. "I have something that might work."

Jared darted out of the way just in time.

His father turned the game on before they even reached the stairs.

"Dinner has been delayed indefinitely," Jared announced as he entered his room. "Our mothers are having a fashion show." He made a face. "We may have to fend for ourselves. Dibs on the leftover pizza rolls."

Evan didn't respond.

His eyes were glued to Jared's laptop.

Jared bounded across the room and slammed it shut. "Woah. Hey. What do you think you're doing?"

Evan pulled back to blink at him.

It was like he was coming out of a stupor.

"What..."

Jared sighed and opened his laptop. He shielded the screen from Evan, even though the damage had already been done.

Evan had been looking at the college station's website.

It could've been worse.

Much worse.

That did not explain the look.

Jared tilted his head.

"You left it open," Evan said quickly. "You left it open and I didn't know your wi-fi password and I'm out of data and I was trying to remember the name of this-this park my dad told me about and-"

"Breathe," Jared ordered.

Evan sucked in a breath. "And it autofilled and went to this site and..."

"And?"

"And..." Evan gestured at the computer.

Jared looked again.

The browser was open to the page for Alana's brother's show.

A replay had been paused.

Jared hit play.

He let it play for less than a minute, just long enough to understand the look.

The look grew stronger while he was watching the screen.

Evan looked like he'd seen a ghost.

He didn't say anything.

He didn't try to say anything.

Jared scratched his neck. "I've been meaning to ask you about that."

"You knew?" Evan rasped.

Jared wrinkled his nose. "About that?" He pointed at the screen. "I didn't know Alana gave the letter to her brother, but--"

"Alana?" Evan squeaked. "What does she-how does she-what--"

"Breathe," Jared ordered.

Evan sucked in a breath.

"Who wrote it?"

Evan took a step back. "What?"

"The letter. Who wrote it? It's been driving us crazy."

"Us?" Evan looked like he was going to be sick. "You and Alana?"

"And Zoe."

Jared regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth.

"Zoe?" Evan looked like wanted to die.

Jared looked away. "Well, yeah. I mean--"

"That was none of your... It was none of..."

Evan ran out of the room.

Jared didn't follow him out.

He wasn't surprised when he looked out the window a minute later and saw the Hansens getting in their car.

Cynthia

Zoe spritzed her wrist and sniffed the perfume.

She did it quickly, subtly, while her mother's back was turned.

Cynthia wouldn't have seen it if she hadn't glanced in the mirror at the right moment.

She didn't say anything. She simply smiled and continued fussing with her hair.

"What time do you think you'll be home?"

"By eleven, I hope." Cynthia closed her eyes. "I hate when these things go longer than that."

"Jamie and I ordered a cake."

"For Connor?"

Zoe gave her a look that screamed the word 'duh.'

"I didn't know you were..." Cynthia put down her brush. "I could've made something."

"It's your gift to him," Zoe grinned.

"Not baking is a gift?"

"Do you really think he'd want a gluten-free, fat-free, sugar-free-"

"There would've been sugar!"

"-cake for his birthday?"

"And fat," Cynthia said. "You can't make a cake without fat."

Zoe raised her eyebrows. "But you've tried!"

Cynthia chose to be the bigger person and ignore her daughter's teasing. She pointed at the necklaces on her bed. "Which one?"

"I like the silver one, but the pearls go better with your dress."

Cynthia held out the pearls.

Zoe scooted over to help. "Were these Granny's?"

Cynthia nodded. "She gave them to me when I turned eighteen."

Zoe looked at the necklace again. Her eyes practically bore into it.

“Next year,” Cynthia smiled.

“I can’t see myself in pearls.”

“I can.” Cynthia swung around to check her reflection. “So, what’s the plan for tonight?”

“Jamie and I are taking him out to dinner and a movie. We’ll have cake when you get home.”

Cynthia fixed her makeup and swallowed her thoughts.

She didn’t say that it was a bad idea to eat dessert that late.

She didn’t gush about how happy she was that Zoe was willingly spending time with her brother.

It was a fragile thing. She wasn’t entirely sure how it had come about.

She was sure Jamie had something – everything – to do with it.

She knew she should thank her sister, but she couldn’t bring herself to say the words out loud.

A wave of guilt washed over her. “I can still cancel.”

Zoe pulled back in surprise. “The dinner?”

“Your father can go by himself. I can say I’m sick. It’s Connor’s birthday. I really should be with him.”

“It’s fine. Jamie and I have got this.”

Cynthia poked at her hair. “I’ll make your father leave by ten.”

“So, cake at one then?”

“Eleven. We’ll be home by eleven.”

Zoe smiled like she didn’t believe that for a second.

Cynthia smoothed her dress.

She checked her hair.

She fixed her lipstick.

She took a step back and examined as much of her reflection as possible.

She looked fine.

Of course, she did.

She fiddled with her purse and very briefly contemplated calling Zoe.

Just to check in, to see how the movie was.

It had to be over by now, didn't it? It was after ten.

But it was a Friday night and Jamie was Jamie.

Cynthia hoped Jamie had kids someday. She wanted a chance to be the fun aunt.

It wasn't the same with Larry's brother's kids. They'd never see her the way Connor and Zoe saw Jamie.

A text popped up.

Zoe.

We're getting ice cream to go with the cake. Any requests?

The question made Cynthia happy for reasons she couldn't quite place. *Mint chocolate chip, please.*

Ooh, Mom! Look at you! Living it up on your birthing day!

Birthing day?

That had Jamie written all over it.

Cynthia put her phone away.

She picked up her clutch and looked at the door.

She couldn't bring herself to leave. Not yet.

She needed a minute.

The party was a lot.

It was bigger than she'd expected.

She'd thought it was going to be a small dinner to celebrate Tom's promotion, not a night at the country club.

At least the food was good.

And for once, she wasn't counting calories.

Happy birthing day to her!

She resisted the urge to ask Zoe to get sprinkles.

The door swung open. Laughter filled the room.

Loud laughter, bordering on raucous.

A pair of women stumbled into the room, clutching their stomachs and each other while they laughed.

“Did you-did you...” The one on the left couldn’t finish her sentence.

The one on the right understood anyway. She nodded excitedly. “Yes! I can’t believe it. I can’t believe you set me up with someone who-”

“My mother thinks I should marry him. She thinks Tommy’s my last chance at love.”

Her friend rolled her eyes. “That’s crap and you know it.”

“I know.” She leaned forward to fix her lipstick. “At least the food’s good.”

“Best meal I’ve had in years.”

“My mother’s going to have a fit if I dump him.”

“See, this is why I keep my love life separate. For Evan’s sake and for mine. I doubt Evan would’ve gotten attached to Todd, but Frank-”

“Ooh, whatever happened to Frank?”

“Married, two kids, one on the way.” Her eyes widened when she noticed Cynthia. “Oh. Hello!”

“Hello!” Cynthia parroted.

The women exchanged a look.

The room fell silent.

Cynthia glanced at the door. She should leave. She knew that. She was intruding, even if she’d been there first.

Her phone buzzed.

Zoe had gotten sprinkles.

Cynthia sent her a thumbs up.

She fixed her hair. Again. For what had to be the fifth time.

It still looked perfect.

“I know you. Why do I know you?”

Cynthia turned around to look at the woman properly. She wasn't one of the usual company wives. Cynthia racked her brain to place the face. “From school? The workshop with Ms. Ross?”

The woman's eyes widened. “The carob cookies!”

Cynthia smiled and nodded.

The woman pointed to herself. “Heidi.”

“Cynthia.”

Heidi's friend made a face at her phone. “Tommy wants to know where I am. He's getting ready to make his speech.”

Heidi raised her eyebrows. “Are you still going up there?”

“For the pictures?” She bit her lip. “How bad would that be, if I dump him the day after our picture gets plastered all over his firm's website?”

“Pretty bad.”

“Eh...” Her friend shrugged and left anyway.

Heidi didn't leave.

She didn't look like she was even considering leaving.

Cynthia checked her nails.

She should go back. Do the wifely thing. Stand next to Larry and smile politely at whatever “jokes” Tom made about his success.

She knew the drill. She'd been to dozens of these dinners.

The difference was that Larry didn't like Tom. There was a good chance he was listening to his speech at the bar.

She could find him there. They could chuckle at Tom's arrogance.

Larry could do that without her. He wasn't the only one in the firm who hated Tom.

Even Zoe had made a face when she'd heard whose dinner they were attending.

There was a story there.

Cynthia wasn't sure if she'd hear it.

She checked her phone.

Nothing.

She assumed that meant Jamie was taking the kids home.

She checked the time. Tom's speech would take five minutes, ten max. She could start easing Larry out the door then.

Which meant she should try to track him down.

She stood to go.

Heidi didn't budge. She smiled tightly. "I'm waiting for my Uber."

An Uber.

That was a foreign concept to Cynthia. She knew about them, of course. Larry took them sometimes. From the airport usually, when he got in late and didn't want to be a bother.

"I came with Todd," Heidi went on. "Rookie mistake. I've been out of the game too long."

"The game?" Cynthia frowned.

"The dating game. I haven't... It's been years since I've made it past date two." She tucked her hair behind her ears. "I should've driven myself. I know better."

"We can give you a ride if you-"

Heidi waved her hand dismissively. "My Uber will be here soon."

Cynthia turned to go.

"Have you had any luck? With your son?"

Cynthia's eyes went wide. "With-"

"College. You said you couldn't get him to come with you to the thing with Ms. Ross. Has he started working on his applications?"

There wasn't an easy answer to that.

Cynthia wasn't sure what Connor was doing. She wasn't sure if Connor knew what he was doing.

He wouldn't talk to her about it. She was afraid to push too much.

They had time. She kept reminding herself they had time. Months and months of time.

"We spent the summer touring schools," Cynthia said in the most upbeat voice she could manage.

It wasn't a lie. Not exactly.

They'd gone to almost a dozen schools.

She'd gone to almost a dozen schools.

Connor had gone to two.

The tour had been for Zoe's benefit mostly.

Heidi lowered her eyes. "I wish we could do that."

Her head popped up when she heard herself. "I mean... I just mean it's hard. Being a single parent is hard sometimes. I can't take the time off work and Evan won't go by himself."

"Connor won't go at all. I had to trick him each time."

That got a smile out of Heidi.

"I might be able to you with that," Cynthia offered. "With the tours, I mean. Not with tricking your son. We always have room in our car."

"Thank you, but Evan wouldn't even go with Eileen when she took Jared last month. I doubt he'd..." Heidi's phone buzzed. "My ride's here."

"I'll walk you out."

The sound of laughter greeted them when they stepped into the hall.

Loud laughter. Fake laughter.

Cynthia spotted Larry at the bar. She tapped the wrist where her watch would've been if she had one that went with her dress.

Larry nodded as if to say 'message received.'

Heidi lingered in the doorway for a moment.

Cynthia followed her gaze. Heidi's friend was standing in the front with Tom. She was clutching his arm and beaming like he was the most brilliant man alive.

Cynthia hoped she'd never looked like that. She'd done her fair share of beaming at Larry. She liked to think she'd done it in a more dignified way.

Dignified and subtle.

"Is it always like this?"

"Always," Cynthia confirmed without thinking.

Heidi grimaced at that. "I'm glad I came then. I'm glad I let Maggie set me up. It's good to know I'm not missing out."

Cynthia could see her point.

She wondered if it applied to her too.

Cynthia liked her life.

Most days, she'd say she loved it.

It wasn't perfect. She wasn't perfect. Her marriage wasn't perfect. Her family wasn't perfect.

She wasn't so blinded by maternal love that she thought her kids were perfect.

It was a good life though.

She was lucky. She had to remember that sometimes.

She had to remind herself how lucky she was.

She wondered what it would be like to be single at her age. To be a single mother at her age. To try to navigate the dating scene again.

She didn't think she could do it.

She knew she couldn't do it while holding down a job.

She'd had a job once. Briefly. During the first two years of her marriage. She'd quit before Connor was born.

It hadn't been a fancy job, but she'd liked it. She'd liked working in a shop and talking to people and helping them pick out candles.

She wondered if the store was still there. She hadn't been to that part of town in years.

She wondered if Zoe would go with her. Or maybe Jamie. She could always ask Jamie.

Larry would go if she begged.

She knew better than to try Connor.

The cake wasn't as bad as Cynthia had expected.

She'd expected Jamie to go all out, to order something frilly with layers and layers of icing.

And chocolate.

So much chocolate.

She knew her sister.

Her sister knew Connor.

The cake suited him.

The singing did not.

They did it anyway.

Zoe sang the loudest.

Connor kept his head down to hide his embarrassment or amusement or fury.

Cynthia hated that she couldn't tell what he was feeling.

She hated that she couldn't ask what he'd wished for when he blew out the candles.

He wouldn't tell her if she did. And not just for superstitious reasons.

Larry cut the cake. Zoe scooped the ice cream. Jamie loaded everyone up with sprinkles.

Cynthia allowed herself a moment to watch her son.

He was a man. An actual man. In the legal sense anyway.

She wondered what kind of man he'd be.

She couldn't picture it. She hated that she couldn't picture it.

She blinked the thought away.

She leaned over to kiss the top of his head.

"Happy eighteenth birthday, sweetie!"

He didn't respond. He didn't react. He simply poked at his cake.

She wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "And here's to eighty more!"

Heidi

“I think I’m engaged.”

Heidi rubbed her forehead and attempted to inhale her coffee.

It was too early for Maggie and her shenanigans.

“Did you hear me?”

“I heard you.”

Maggie sighed into the phone.

Heidi sighed and took the bait. “You think you’re engaged? Isn’t that something you should know for sure?”

“It all happened so fast.”

“Did you say yes?”

“What?”

“When Tommy proposed? Did you say yes?” Heidi’s mouth twisted to the side. “I’m assuming we’re talking about Tommy.”

“Of course, we’re talking about Tommy!” Maggie huffed. She considered the question for a minute. “I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember saying yes?”

“I don’t remember anything!”

“Then what makes you think you’re-”

“There’s a ring on my finger!”

Heidi chuckled.

“It’s not funny!”

“It’s a little bit funny.”

“I was going to break up with him, not... not...”

“I’m not wearing a yellow bridesmaid’s dress. You know how I look in yellow.”

“Who said anything about yellow?”

“Your whole house is yellow.”

“I’ve always thought my bridesmaids would wear pink.”

“I’m not wearing pink.”

“What color do you want to... This is crazy! I’m not getting married!”

“The ring on your finger disagrees.”

“That ring could mean anything! It could be a friendship ring or... Maybe I stole it. That’s it! Maybe I stole it from one of those fancy-schmancy guests.”

Heidi snorted at how happy her friend sounded. Happy and relieved.

She decided not to point out the implications of said theft.

“How am I going to get out of this one?” Maggie groaned. “Shit. Tommy’s up. Tommy’s here? Tommy’s-”

The call ended.

Heidi put her phone down and sipped her coffee.

She jumped when she saw she wasn’t alone. “Good morning. You’re up early.”

“So are you,” Evan countered.

Heidi frowned and checked the time. Nine o’clock. Semi-early. Saturday early, especially for Evan.

He looked more awake than she was. Awake and dressed and ready to go.

She checked the date. It was Saturday. It was definitely Saturday.

“Are you going somewhere?”

Evan shrugged and unwrapped a Pop Tart. “There’s this thing at school today.”

“On a Saturday?”

Evan shrugged again.

“Did you have fun with Jared last night?”

Evan stared at his feet.

Heidi closed her eyes. She knew what that meant. “It must’ve been an early night. You were asleep when I got home.”

“I didn’t go.”

“Evan...”

She tried and failed to hide her disappointment.

“I-I didn’t... I didn’t feel like it.”

“Like watching a movie at Jared’s house? It’s not like he invited you to a kegger.”

“He only asked me because...”

“Because what?”

“Nothing.” Evan wiped his mouth with his hand. “I should go.”

“Where are you going exactly?”

“School.”

“On a Saturday? Why are you going to school on a Saturday?”

“They’re having this college fair in the gym and I thought I’d go check it out.”

A college fair? That was doable. She could do that. She should do that. She had the time.

“Let me get my keys.”

“I was going to take the bus.”

“Well, now you’re not,” Heidi beamed. “We can go together.”

“You’re not dressed.”

“I’ll get dressed. It’ll take me a minute.”

Evan did not look convinced.

“Two minutes,” Heidi promised. “Five tops.”

“You don’t have class?”

Heidi shook her head.

“Or work? Don’t you have to work?”

Heidi shook her head again. “Budget cuts. They don’t need me until Tuesday.”

She tried to sound positive, like it was a good thing, like she wasn’t panicking about bills.

Evan did not look convinced.

“Unless you’d rather go with someone else. Jared or-”

“I’ll go warm up the car.”

Heidi watched him go.

There was something going on there.

She doubted he’d tell her what.

“Ow! Evan! Why am I not surprised?”

Heidi spun around to see the source of the laughter behind her.

A girl was clutching her forehead.

Evan was clutching his arm and looking around wildly. He managed to sputter an apology.

The girl’s laughter faded into a smile. “It’s okay. I’m used to it by now.”

Evan’s eyes blinked at an alarming rate. “This is my mom.”

The girl beamed at that. “Hi Evan’s mom! I’m Alana.”

“Hi Alana! I’m Evan’s mom,” Heidi said with a smile.

Alana returned it before turning to Evan. “I’m glad you didn’t make me drop my bag. I have so many brochures in here I don’t know what I would’ve done if they’d fallen out. It’s so overwhelming, you know. I don’t know how I’ll get to them all. I haven’t even been over there yet.” She gestured at the left side of the gym. “Which booths have you looked at?”

“We just got here,” Evan muttered.

He stared at his shoes when he said it.

It took all of Heidi’s willpower not to squeeze his arm.

“Do you know where you want to go next year?” Alana asked.

Nothing.

Not even a blink.

Heidi cleared her throat to get Alana’s attention. “Do you know where you want to go?”

Alana sighed wistfully. “So many places. There are so many good schools out there and... I want to get out of here. I know that much.” She nodded at Evan. “What about you?”

Evan blinked at the wall. “I... uh... I...”

“Do you want to stay local?” She glanced over her shoulder. “My brother stayed local. His friend May’s running their school’s booth.”

Evan shrugged at his shoes.

Alana bit her lip. “Part of me wants to go there too. Just for a year or two to save some money. I could live at home.” She made a face. “Scratch that. That’s a dealbreaker. I’ll sleep on Alan’s floor if I can’t get a room.”

Heidi glanced at Evan expectantly.

Nothing.

His eyes never left the floor.

Alana pointed to her left. “Oh! There’s Tracy!” She inhaled sharply. “And John.” Her hands twisted together. “I should go say hi.”

There was a sudden, noticeable drop in her enthusiasm. She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin and strode away with a smile on her face.

Heidi elbowed her son. “She seems nice.”

Evan’s eyes flashed in her direction.

Her stomach dropped.

She knew what he was thinking.

He’d messed up. He knew he’d messed up. He knew she knew it too.

He felt like a failure for not being able to carry on a simple conversation.

She rubbed his arm. “Sweetie...”

He pulled away.

She took the hint. She pointed at the table to their right. “Shall we?”

Evan followed her without saying a word.

They didn’t make it far before they ran into someone else.

Luckily, it didn’t involve an actual collision that time.

“Oh. Hello! Fancy seeing you here!” Cynthia smiled. She did a double take when she spotted Evan. “Is this your son?”

Heidi nodded and looped her arm through Evan’s. “This is Evan.”

“We’ve met,” Evan muttered.

Heidi glanced between them. “You have?”

“Evan’s friends with my daughter Zoe,” Cynthia explained. “I didn’t realize he belonged to you.”

“Zoe?” Heidi couldn’t keep the surprise out of her voice.

Evan gave her a pleading look.

She gave him a smile that didn’t seem to calm his nerves.

“She’s over there,” Cynthia told Evan. “Talking to someone from the music conservatory.”

“Oh,” Evan mumbled. “Um.”

“Do you want to go say hi?” Heidi suggested.

Evan looked at her like she’d asked if he wanted to operate on her brain.

He stayed where he was.

If Cynthia thought that was strange, she didn’t let it show. “So, you got home all right then?”

Heidi’s eyes darted towards Evan. He was trying to process that. She decided it would be in her best interest for them to move on.

She forced herself to nod. “We should-”

“Home from what?” Evan demanded.

“The dinner party last night,” Cynthia said.

Evan blinked at his mother. “I thought you had class last night.”

“I...” Heidi cleared her throat. “I told you I’d be home late.”

“I thought you were in class. I thought you were...”

Cynthia smiled apologetically. “I’d better catch up with Zoe. It was nice seeing you again!”

Heidi closed her eyes and tried to put her thoughts together, to come up with something to say. Something that would wipe that look off Evan’s face.

Evan was gone when she turned around.

She joined him at the first booth.

Neither of them said a word.

Heidi flipped through the booklet before setting it down. “Do you have any information on your science program?”

“Of course,” the woman beamed. She tilted her head at Evan. “Which subject are you interested in?”

Evan’s eyes went wide.

Heidi closed hers.

They were drowning in his silence. Again.

She wondered why he’d thought he could do this alone. She wondered if she needed to give Dr. Sherman a call. Maybe he needed a new pill or a new therapist or... Something. There had to be something that could get him over this hump.

She nudged his arm.

It made him jump.

“Chemistry?” the woman prompted. “Biology? Physics?”

“Environmental science,” Heidi said after the longest pause of her life.

The woman nodded and dug through her bin. “I have a brochure about that.”

Heidi’s phone rang.

Work.

She squeezed Evan’s shoulder and stepped aside to take the call.

They needed her to come in. Bailey had called out at the last minute. She said yes right away.

Evan had moved on by the time she hung up.

It took her a minute to find him. He wasn’t at the next booth or the one after that. He wasn’t laughing with the boys hanging around the bleachers.

He was in the hallway, staring at the door.

His expression made it clear he knew what was coming.

“That was the hospital,” Heidi said apologetically.

Evan nodded.

“I have to-”

“Leave,” Evan finished. “You’re leaving me here?”

“You were planning to come by yourself,” Heidi reminded him.

She wondered how that would’ve gone, if it would’ve been better, if he would’ve found his words.

He let out a huff that didn’t sit right with her. She raised an eyebrow.

“You always do this.”

Heidi’s heart skipped a beat.

“You always bail when I need you.”

Heidi sucked in a breath. “Sweetie... I...”

“It’s fine. Go. The hospital needs you.”

“It’s these damn budget cuts,” Heidi sighed. “If I didn’t need this job so much, I’d say to hell with it.”

Evan nodded stiffly. “I know. I know you’d stay if you could.”

“I would,” Heidi insisted. “I will. I... I’ll call Janice back. I’ll tell her I can’t come in until one. That should be enough time, shouldn’t it?”

Evan closed his eyes. “It’s fine.”

Heidi patted her purse. She didn’t pull out her phone. “Do you want me to take you home first?”

Evan shook his head.

“Do you know what time the bus is coming? The weekend schedule’s different.”

“I’ll look it up.”

Heidi bit her lip. “Do you want me to ask Cynthia if she can give you a ride?”

Evan’s spine stiffened. “What?”

“Zoe’s mom.” She grinned at that. “Your *friend* Zoe’s mom.”

Evan stared at his feet.

“Is she the same Zoe you-”

“Mom!” Evan hissed.

Her hands flew up in surrender. “I’m glad you made a new friend.”

Evan fiddled with his phone. "She's not my friend."

"She's not?"

"She..." Evan let his breath out in a huff. "We worked on a-a project together."

"That's a good foundation for a friendship."

"It's not like that. She... We..."

"I think you're selling yourself short. Zoe would be lucky to have a friend like you."

Evan poked at his phone. "I can take the 11:30 bus."

"Text me when you get home."

Evan muttered that he would.

"I'll be home in time for dinner. Think about what you want. I'll pick it up."

"Okay," Evan nodded.

"Anything but Chinese. I'm sick of Chinese."

"We could get a pizza?"

"Pizza sounds perfect," Heidi beamed.

Heidi threw herself onto the couch and groaned into her hands. She lifted her head when Lauren shushed her. "What are you watching?" She blinked when she saw the tv wasn't on. "What are you-"

Lauren motioned for her to quiet down. "It's the college station. My niece got me hooked."

Heidi shook her head at the boombox. Her fingers twitched in the direction of the remote. Somewhere out there, there was a decorating show begging to be watched. "Where did that come from? I didn't know we even had-"

"Shh!" Lauren hissed. She smiled apologetically. "This is my therapy."

"Your therapy?" Heidi chuckled.

"Yes!" Lauren turned the volume down when a song started playing.

It was a weird song.

Heidi didn't know how she'd classify it.

"The Jazz Club with Alan Beck!" Lauren wiggled her fingers to emphasize the name.

“Your therapy?”

“My therapy.” Lauren picked at a spot on her hand and frowned. “It actually is like therapy. People call in and talk about their problems.”

Heidi pointed at the boombox. “That song’s a problem.”

“The host has an eccentric taste in music.”

“Have you ever called in to the show?”

Lauren harumphed at that. “I’m not that pathetic.”

Heidi grabbed a magazine and checked the time.

Ten minutes. Her break was over in ten minutes.

She checked her phone.

Evan was home. He wanted to get garlic knots with their pizza.

She sent him a thumbs up.

Lauren shushed her even though she wasn’t talking.

The show was back.

The host had a soothing voice. Heidi could see the appeal.

He took a call from a girl who spent a solid minute whining about her boyfriend.

He listened without judgment and offered a vague platitude of advice that made Lauren hum her approval.

“You don’t have a boyfriend,” Heidi reminded her.

Lauren shushed her again. She made a face when her phone went off. “Back to work.”

Heidi’s hand bounced between the remote and the boombox. It just didn’t feel like a break if she didn’t catch a minute of HGTV.

The host answered another call.

And that was it. She was hooked.

The caller thanked the host for the time management advice he’d gotten the last time he’d called and started rattling off the things that had worked.

Heidi felt like she should be taking notes.

The host chuckled when he was done. “It’s always good to hear something helped.”

There was a rustling sound, followed by more laughter.

“What?” the host demanded. “I help!”

“Are you sure about that?” a new voice asked.

“People thank me all the time! Look at these messages!”

There was a pause which Heidi assumed meant the newcomer – a girl – was reading.

“Nope, nope, nope,” the girl tutted. “Come on, people. You’re inflating his ego. I know at least one of these sessions has led to disaster. What about that girl you told to-”

“Lanie!”

“-go skinny dipping in the rain? Didn’t she get pneumonia?”

“That hasn’t been confirmed,” the host murmured. “And it was a metaphor. I didn’t actually mean she should go skinny dipping in the rain. I was quoting ‘Unwritten.’”

“Uh huh,” the girl snorted. “Sure, you were. Come on, people. Give me something to work with here. Tell me how my brother’s steered you wrong.”

“Hey... I’ve been meaning to ask, any luck on your end?”

“What?”

“The letter. The one that started it all. It’s our biggest request. People want an update.”

“I don’t have an update.”

“Did you ever figure out who wrote it?”

There was a pause.

Heidi could tell it was an uncomfortable one.

“You’re trying to distract me,” the girl spat. “Let me see those messages! Someone must be saying you ruined their life!”

“I didn’t ruin anyone’s life!” The host paused for a moment. “And if I did, I’m very, very, deeply sorry. Shoot me an email and we’ll figure it out together.”

The girl snorted into her mic.

“I’m serious though, Lanie. That letter struck a chord with people. You wouldn’t believe how many people have written in about it.”

“They have?”

“Yeah. It really struck a chord.” The host cleared his throat. “I wish that everything was different. I wish that I was part of something. I wish that anything I said mattered to anyone. I mean, face it, would anybody even notice if I disappeared tomorrow?”

“You memorized all that?”

“Like I said, it struck a chord. We’ve discussed it on here more than once. You’d know that if you listened to my show.”

“I listen! Sometimes.”

“You’re busy, I know. Senior year’s kicking your butt.”

“It is!”

“Oh! We have a caller. You’re on with-”

“That’s my letter.”

Heidi nearly fell off the couch.

“Your letter?” the host repeated. “You mean, you wrote it or it was written to you?”

“Yes.”

“Which is it?”

“It’s-it’s personal! You... You have no right to-”

“Are you okay?” the host cut in. “My listeners have been worried. Not worried. Concerned. The letter sounds so... Looks like we lost him.”

“Can we call him back?” the girl whispered.

“We can try,” the host said. He lightened his tone. “In the meantime, enjoy this little number by Yvette Tiger and the Tiger Roars.”

Heidi jumped at the sound.

Eccentric didn’t begin to cover the host’s taste in music.

She switched the radio off.

Her break was over. She knew it was over. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew she had to get back to work.

She couldn’t move.

His voice had been muffled and low like he’d been trying to disguise it.

She recognized it anyway.

Of course, she'd recognized it.

She'd know it anywhere.

She didn't know what it meant.

What any of it meant.

She just knew this was one of those things, one of those moments, that made her wonder if she really knew her son at all.

Larry

“I don’t know...”

“Play it again. Really listen this time. That’s Evan. I’m telling you it’s Evan.”

“It doesn’t sound like him.”

“It does! You’re not listening right.”

“How can I not be listening right? Isn’t there only one way to listen? Should I try using my toes instead?”

Zoe wiggled said toes.

Her friend snorted.

They both giggled.

Larry took that as his cue. The tension had dissolved enough that he felt it was safe for him to enter the kitchen.

Zoe jumped in surprise. “Dad!”

Larry put his hands up as he breezed by. “Don’t mind me. I’m just passing through.”

“Coffee?” Zoe wrinkled her nose. “At this hour? Mom said you shouldn’t have coffee past four because of your heart.”

“I have a motion to file.”

Zoe glanced at her friend. “My dad’s a lawyer.”

Zoe’s friend perked up a bit. “Oh. Right!”

“What?” Zoe laughed. “Do you want to be a lawyer?”

“It’s on my list.”

“Your list?”

“Of possible careers.” She spun around to face Larry. “Do you like being a lawyer?”

“It has its moments,” Larry said.

His brain scrambled to remember the friend’s name. Cynthia had mentioned it before she’d left.

Anna? Agatha? Alexa?

Alana?

That was it. He was almost positive.

He wondered what had happened to Nicole. At least he'd known Nicole. Nicole and Jenny and the other one. Whatever her name was.

He took a sip of his coffee and willed his brain to wake up. He had at least four hours of work ahead of him.

"You have to work all the time." Zoe popped a grape in her mouth. "And drink an insane amount of coffee at all hours of the day and night."

She nodded at her father like his very existence was proving her point.

Alana considered that for a moment. "I like coffee."

"You'd better," Zoe grinned.

"Liking coffee isn't a prerequisite," Larry assured her. "There are plenty of tea drinkers at my firm."

"I like tea," Alana smiled.

"They have a never-ending supply of bagels at his firm," Zoe told her.

"I like bagels."

Larry pointed at Zoe's laptop. "What are you girls working on?"

Zoe's eyes went wide. She closed her laptop and leaned on it for good measure.

Larry raised his eyebrows and considered his options.

Zoe wasn't Connor. Her secrets were always of the 'I accidentally broke Mom's favorite mug' variety.

Whatever it was, how bad could it really be?

It was suspicious though.

If Connor had done that, he would've demanded to see what he was hiding.

The girls exchanged a look.

Larry swallowed a chuckle.

That wasn't suspicious at all...

Something was up.

He'd picked up on that the second he'd come in the room.

He'd sensed that their conversation went beyond which boy had the cutest butt or which girl really shouldn't have gotten bangs.

Alana wasn't Nicole. Obviously.

He decided to give them an out. "Is it for school?"

"School," Zoe breathed.

"It's for the paper," Alana chirped. "We're doing a-a-"

"A poll," Zoe finished.

"A poll," Alana repeated.

Larry sipped his coffee. He willed his face to stay blank. "What sort of poll?"

The girls exchanged a look.

Larry pretended to check the time. "Would you look at that?"

He clucked his tongue and nodded at the door.

"Don't stay up too late!" Zoe called after him.

Larry glanced over his shoulder.

Zoe's laptop was already open.

The girls were staring at in a way that made him wonder if his instincts were wrong. Maybe it was time for him to reevaluate some things.

Zoe's laptop had a password.

Of course, it did.

He wasn't surprised it did.

He couldn't begin to guess what it might be.

He didn't have time to guess.

Zoe would be back any second. He glanced out the window to check her progress.

She'd successfully escorted Alana back to her car. The girls were talking. Talking and looking serious. Not a smile in sight.

Larry sighed and sipped his coffee.

He tried the word 'purple' on a whim.

It didn't work.

Of course, it didn't.

Footsteps on the stairs.

He closed the laptop a second too late.

Connor gave him a look. "Did you try JellyBelly73?"

Larry blinked at that. "What?"

"JellyBelly73," Connor drawled. "Capital J, capital B."

"What makes you think-"

"Just a hunch," Connor shrugged.

Larry glanced out the window.

The coast was still clear.

"JellyBelly73," Connor urged. "All together."

Larry gave it a try.

And just like that, he was in.

He tilted his head at Connor. "How on earth did you know that?"

Connor shrugged again. "What are we looking for?"

Larry hadn't realized they were a team.

Connor was practically buzzing with excitement. "Email? Instagram? What?"

"They were looking at something earlier. Zoe and her friend."

Connor nodded slowly. "Browser history."

He nudged Larry out of the way and pulled up Zoe's browser.

Larry leaned over to see.

There was nothing overtly bad.

Email. A recipe for triple fudge brownies. A bunch of Wikipedia pages that were either for school or a sign that his daughter had a very diverse set of interests.

Nothing alarming.

Connor kept scrolling.

“There.” Larry tapped the screen. “That’s around the time I came in here.”

He frowned when he saw what they’d been looking at.

A college radio station’s website.

He couldn’t imagine why Zoe had felt the need to hide that.

“What are you doing?”

Larry moved to close the laptop.

Connor stopped him. “Invading your privacy.” Connor smirked over his shoulder. “Fun, isn’t it?”

Zoe flew across the room. “That’s not funny! What are you looking for? What do you think you’re going to find?”

Connor tutted at the screen. “You stayed up until two last night taking personality quizzes?” He tapped his chin. “So, what kind of cookie are you? Don’t tell me. You’re an oatmeal raisin. The kind people get stuck with when they really wanted chocolate chip.”

“Shut up!” Zoe snapped. She tugged at her hair. “Stop! Just... What are you doing? Why-”

Connor snorted. “You still like One Direction?”

Zoe closed her eyes. She redirected her attention onto her father. “If you want to know something, just ask.”

“Do you still read Larry fan fiction?” Connor chuckled to himself. His eyes darted towards his father. “That’ll never stop being funny.”

Zoe put a hand up to block her brother’s gaze. “Is this about before? We weren’t doing anything! We were just...”

“Just what?” Larry urged.

Zoe bit her lip. “Alana’s brother hosts a show on his school’s station. We were listening to that.”

Connor’s spine went rigid. His laughter cut short. He stared at her laptop.

He closed her laptop. “What’s for dinner?”

Larry frowned at the question. "That's all?"

"That's all," Zoe promised.

There was more to it than that.

Larry was sure of it.

"What time's Mom coming home?" Connor wondered. "I'm hungry."

"There are leftovers in the fridge," Larry said. He glanced at Zoe's laptop. "What kind of show is it?"

Zoe sighed and opened the page.

"The Jazz Club with Alan Beck," Larry read. "Is that a euphemism for something?"

Zoe wrinkled her nose. "Ew. No. It's just a jazz show. Jazz music. People call in sometimes and talk about their problems. That's it."

Connor shook his head at the fridge. "I'm not eating that crap."

Larry couldn't blame him. "We'll order a pizza then." He pointed at the jazz site. "What-"

"I don't feel like pizza," Connor said.

Larry rubbed his forehead. His question was gone. He tried to get it back.

He couldn't get it back.

It was lost in the abyss that was his mind.

"Can we go to Louie's?" Zoe asked.

Connor made a face. "I don't want to go out to eat."

"How about carry out then?"

Connor made a face to show he could live with that.

Larry reached for his phone. "I'll call it in."

His children rattled off their requests.

He thought about calling Cynthia to see if she wanted anything.

He already knew the answer.

Louie's was not her kind of place.

Even their salads were greasy.

The diner smelled like salt and sugar and something spicy he couldn't place.

It was heaven.

Larry eyed the dessert case while he waited for the server to return with their order.

He wondered if the three of them could polish off the Oreo cake before Cynthia returned. He thought they were up for it.

He asked the server to throw in three slices.

He leaned against the counter and checked his phone while he waited.

It was good to get out for a bit. It gave his brain a chance to rest and reset.

Emphasis on the reset.

The noise made it hard to rest.

The diner was packed with the Sunday evening crowd. Families. Lots of families.

Larry could remember bringing the kids to Louie's for a Sunday Sundae. It had been a thing they did once a month. Sometimes twice. Cynthia had come with them. Those had been the days. Back before Cynthia swore off sugar and Connor...

Before Connor became Connor.

Larry's phone buzzed.

Cynthia was home. She wanted to know why Zoe had told her not to make a cauliflower stew.

He pocketed his phone without responding. If he told her where he was, she'd tell him to cancel the order.

He was not in the mood for cauliflower stew.

His brain needed more sustenance than that.

A man came out of the kitchen with their food. He smiled when he handed it over. He nodded at a paper sticking out of the bag. "You look like a man who appreciates good music. You should check out my nephew's show."

Larry studied the flier as he wove through the diner. There were copies of it everywhere, on every pole, board, and wall.

The Jazz Club with Alan Beck.

It felt like a sign.

Larry tucked it away for later.

Dinner was uneventful. Civil. Surprisingly civil considering the grease.

Cynthia didn't say a word about it. She ate her salad without commenting on the number of fries on Zoe's plate.

She raised an eyebrow at the amount on Larry's.

And that was it.

Civil.

Zoe talked about school, SAT prep, and her band. She didn't say a word about *The Jazz Club with Alan Beck*.

Connor didn't say a word until he needed more ketchup.

And that was it.

Civil.

Larry was the last one up.

That wasn't unusual, even on a night when he didn't have a motion to file.

He drank his coffee and focused. And tried to focus.

The silence was too much.

He turned the tv on and promptly turned it back off. It wasn't the right kind of noise.

His eyes landed on the flier.

The Jazz Club with Alan Beck.

He looked it up.

His timing was perfect. He clicked the button to go live and promptly regretted it.

The song was strange. It sounded like someone was trying to mimic a thunderstorm with a xylophone. Or possibly a triangle. It was hard to tell.

It ended before he could switch it off.

The host came back on. "For those of you just tuning in, tonight's question is why. Why are we here? Why are we alive? Why?"

Someone snorted into the microphone. “Are you trying to make them do your psych homework?”

“Philosophy,” the host corrected. “And no, Lanie, no. Why do you always come in here and act like a brat?”

“You’re calling me a brat? On the air? I’m telling Mom!”

“I call it the way I see it.” The host breathed into his mic. “Isn’t it time for you to go home? It’s a school night!”

“What time is it?”

Larry chuckled at the girl’s panic.

The host did too. “Time for a caller. You’re on with The Bickering Becks.”

The air went dead.

The host tried again. “You’re on with... We lost them.”

“Guess you’ll have to do your homework yourself then.”

“I’m not... I already finished that assignment!”

“But did you turn it in?”

“Not yet,” the host muttered.

“That’s the real reason you want me to find the letter writer. You want to make them do your philosophy homework.”

“It’s not like that.”

“The letter really spoke to you.”

“It spoke to all of us. We’ve all been there. We’ve all felt invisible, like we try and try and it doesn’t matter, like we could disappear and no one would notice.”

“I’d notice if you disappeared.”

“That’s nice, Lanie. Really.” The host huffed into his mic. “And on that note...”

A cow mooed.

For a solid minute, a cow mooed.

Larry took that as a sign he needed a break.

He closed his laptop and grabbed his mug and crept over to the kitchen.

The coffee maker was unplugged. Larry rolled his eyes when he saw that. He wondered where Cynthia had hidden the coffee this time.

He couldn't be bothered to look.

He got some water and some pretzels and stared blankly at the wall while he let his brain rest.

He wondered if it was too late to ask for an extension.

He let his eyes wander.

The kitchen was a mess. Not a mess-mess. A Murphy mess.

There was one plate in the sink.

Cynthia must have been more tired than he'd thought. Tired or preoccupied.

He put the dish in the dishwasher. It gave him a sense of accomplishment.

He returned to the living room.

He opened his document. He closed his document.

He went back to the radio station. He didn't hit play. He scrolled instead.

A tag caught his eye.

The letter.

It was the most popular one by far. Five articles. Dozens of comments.

He started at the beginning.

The motion was not his best work. Far from it. It was bordering on sloppy.

It did the trick though. It would work.

It had to work. He didn't have the energy to tweak it anymore.

He took his laptop upstairs. Not so he could keep working.

To listen again.

He wanted Cynthia to hear it. The first show in *The letter* tag.

He wanted a second opinion.

The caller sort of sounded like Connor. More than sort of.

He knew that 'fuck.' He'd heard it daily for years.

The girl in the background had called the caller Connor. The girl who sounded a lot like Zoe.

Larry couldn't begin to imagine why his son had decided to call into a jazz show and yell at the hosts.

It didn't make sense.

It had something to do with a letter.

He needed a second opinion.

He hugged his laptop to his chest and opened the door.

He stood there for a minute, waiting for Cynthia to roll over and acknowledge his presence.

She didn't move. She didn't budge. She was sound asleep.

Whatever it was would have to wait.

Evan

The house smelled sweet.

Sweet and sugary with a hint of maple.

Evan's stomach growled.

His mind panicked.

It was too early for that kind of panic. Too early for his palms to sweat and his heart to race.

He glanced over his shoulder at his bed.

He wanted to go back. He couldn't go back. He had to take a math quiz in less than two hours.

He went downstairs.

His mother smiled when he came in the kitchen.

He panicked. Something had happened. Something must have happened.

Pancakes on a Monday?

He wondered if it was possible for his parents to get divorced again.

His brain grasped at the next worst possibility. "Did Grandma die?"

His mother tilted her head. "What?"

"Did-"

"No!" Heidi scratched her neck and chuckled. "Grandma's fine. Everyone's fine. Nothing's wrong."

Evan could feel the disbelief on his face.

"Have a seat." She patted the chair next to her.

Something had happened. Something had definitely happened.

He glanced over his shoulder and longed for his bed.

"Evan." His mother squeezed his hand.

He jumped like he'd been shocked. "What?"

"Would you relax? Everything's okay. I promise."

He sat down.

The pancakes smelled amazing.

His stomach growled again.

She sipped her coffee while he dug in.

It was like waiting for the other shoe to drop.

He focused on his pancakes and tried not to think about that.

“I was listening to the radio the other day.”

Evan froze with his fork in the air.

“Lauren. You know Lauren?”

“Not really,” Evan muttered.

Heidi sipped her coffee. “We work together.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Right, so Lauren’s niece is in college now. She’s obsessed with this jazz show on her school’s radio station.”

Evan closed his eyes and pictured his bed.

“She got Lauren hooked. We listened to it during our break the other day.”

Evan blinked at the table.

Heidi chewed her lip and considered her words. “Did I ever tell you about the time I won tickets to a Prince concert?”

Evan shook his head.

“102.7 was having a contest and Maggie and I decided to call in. We thought we were being so clever. We were broke and the show was on a Tuesday. We knew there was no way our parents would let us go.”

“And you won?”

Heidi nodded. “We won.”

She didn’t go on.

Evan tilted his head. As far as pointless stories went, that one felt particularly pointless.

“My mom heard me.” Heidi cleared her throat. “She was listening in the car and she heard me win. She knew what had happened before Maggie and I started screaming.”

“Did she let you go?”

Heidi smiled into her mug. “She didn’t say anything until I got home. She busted me on it while we were eating breakfast.”

Evan dropped his fork. “I didn’t go to a concert.”

“I know, sweetie. I-”

“I haven’t won any tickets! I don’t want any tickets! I-”

“I heard you.”

Evan closed his eyes.

“I always wondered how my mom knew it was me. I didn’t say my name when I won. At least I don’t think I did. Maggie and I were screaming too much. She knew though. Somehow, she knew.”

Evan poked at his plate.

“I didn’t get it until I heard you.” Her brow furrowed. “It was you, wasn’t it? On the radio the other day. You called in and...” She cleared her throat. “I did some research. Apparently, they’ve been trying to solve a mystery on the jazz show. They’re... they’re concerned about... There’s this letter, apparently, and they’ve been-”

Evan pushed away from the table. “I’m going to be late.”

Heidi motioned for him to sit back down. “I’ll write you a note.”

Evan shook his head. “I...”

“Evan.” Heidi’s head bobbed around until she managed to catch his eye. “It was one of your letters, wasn’t it? One of the ones you wrote for Dr. Sherman.”

Evan nodded against his will.

“Sweetie.”

“I have to go!”

“Why don’t you stay home today? I’ll call the school. We can... We can talk or watch movies or... I think it would be good for you – for us – to-”

Evan grabbed his backpack off the floor. “I have to go!”

He ran for the door before she could react.

She didn't follow him out.

"Say cheese!"

Evan screamed at the words and the touch. Jared's touch. One second, he was just sitting on a bench eating his sandwich. The next, he was being tackled and photographed and told to smile.

He pushed Jared away.

Jared groaned like was in pain.

Which he was not.

It hadn't been a hard push.

Evan slung his backpack onto his shoulder and stood to leave.

Jared reached out to stop him.

Evan closed his eyes. "What?"

"My parents think you're mad at me."

Evan gave him a look that screamed the word 'duh.'

"I need proof that you're not."

Evan folded his arms across his chest. He raised an eyebrow to ask how that was his problem.

Jared rolled his eyes. "You just had to go and rat me out to your mom."

"I didn't rat you out to my mom!"

"She told my mom you're mad at me."

"And that's my problem because..."

"Because," Jared huffed.

"Your car insurance bill is due-"

"Tomorrow!" Jared lunged forward again.

Evan jumped out of the way. "I'm not taking a selfie with you!"

"Why not?" Jared moaned. His eyes darted around frantically. "I'll... I'll sign your cast!"

"It's coming off next week."

“Better late than never!”

Evan tried to walk away.

Jared stepped in his path. “Come on! One picture! For old times’ sake!”

Evan snorted at that. “For old times’ sake? You mean the ones where you mocked me and avoided me and-”

“Ooh, look at you. Someone put on his big boy pants today!”

“Get out of my way, Jared.”

Jared raised his eyebrows and stepped to the side. “Alana has this theory, you know.”

Evan froze in spite of himself.

“About you. She thinks you wrote that letter to yourself.”

Evan forced himself to move. His blood went cold and his body went numb, but he moved.

Somehow, he moved.

“I told her no way!” Jared called after him. “Even you’re not that pathetic!”

Evan kept walking.

He didn’t look back.

The afternoon passed by in a blur of classes.

Evan didn’t learn a thing.

He kept his head down and took notes and didn’t process anything his teachers said.

He jumped when the final bell rang.

He packed up his things at a record speed and went to find his bus.

It wasn’t there.

He blinked and looked around and checked the time in case he’d spaced out and there was actually one more class to go.

There wasn’t.

The day was done.

And he wasn’t the only one looking for the buses.

“There was an accident.”

Evan jumped at the proximity of those words.

Alana smiled when he turned around. “Thank you for not smacking me in the face.”

Evan shoved his hands in his pockets. “I...”

“It was a close call,” Alana nodded solemnly. “We’re getting there though. This is progress. We’re having a conversation that didn’t start with bodily injury!”

Evan smiled sheepishly.

His heart raced.

Alana had a theory...

“Do you want a ride?” Alana offered. “I was just in the office and I heard Ms. White say there was an accident on Main. The buses are stuck in that.”

Evan chewed his lip.

An announcement came over the loudspeaker confirming Alana’s story.

A series of groans spread through the crowd.

Evan rocked back on his heels.

Alana linked her arm through his. “Come on. It’s on my way.”

Evan allowed himself to be steered towards her car.

He didn’t have the energy to put up a fight.

The drive was silent. Silent but not quiet.

Alana hummed along to the radio.

Evan wondered if she realized she was doing it. He wasn’t about to ask.

She didn’t speak until they reached his house.

Evan’s heart sped up when she opened her mouth. She’d been biding her time or weighing her words or waiting until they were parked so he wouldn’t jump out of a moving car.

No good could come from what she was about to say.

She smoothed her hair and took a breath. “Hey, so, I’ve got a theory.”

“It could be bunnies,” Evan muttered under his breath.

Alana squinted at him a second before smiling. “Buffy?”

“Yeah.”

“Good one.” She cleared her throat and reached into her bag. She pulled out a piece of paper.

Evan’s heart skipped a beat.

“Did you write this?”

Evan dove for the door handle. He didn’t look at the sheet. “I should... My mom’s probably... Thanks for...”

Alana locked the door before he could open it. She smiled apologetically. “This’ll only take a second.”

Evan wondered how long it would take him to break the window with his cast.

“I know Jared told you...” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I’m starting to think we’ve been going about this all wrong.”

Evan allowed his eyes to drift down to the paper. His stomach sank when he saw it.

It was his letter.

He’d known it was his letter.

He’d been hoping she had a question about the science homework.

He tried the handle again. It didn’t budge.

Alana’s finger was planted firmly on the lock button.

“The more I think about it, the worse I feel. I was so stupid! I should’ve known! I should’ve recognized what this was!”

Evan glanced at her quickly before staring at his house.

“Is it a therapy thing? I had a therapist once who had me do these... Not letters. They were more like positive affirmations, pep talks if you will, to myself. She had me say them to my reflection every morning. It sounds dumb, but it actually worked. Sort of. Sometimes. A little bit.”

Evan’s throat felt dry. He didn’t know what to say. The thought of Alana Beck needing a therapist, needing daily pep talks, needing confidence of any kind was just...

He didn’t know what to say.

“Is that what this is?”

Evan snapped out of his stupor. He snapped his response. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“This letter?” Alana’s brow furrowed. “You wrote it to yourself, didn’t you?”

She shook the letter in his direction.

She shook it with both hands.

Evan threw the door open before she could realize her mistake.

She didn’t chase him up the walk.

She didn’t drive away for what felt like an eternity.

The house smelled like garlic.

Garlic and cheese and salt.

Evan dropped his backpack by the door and crept to the kitchen like there was an intruder inside. He almost grabbed a lamp to smash on their head.

His mother smiled at his expression. “What? I cook.”

“Since when?” Evan blinked.

Heidi raised her eyebrows. “Excuse me? I’ll have you know I-”

“You can cook. I know,” Evan said quickly. “It’s just-“

“It’s not a common occurrence in this house,” Heidi nodded.

“Two meals in one day?” Evan raised his eyebrows.

“I had the time,” Heidi shrugged. “Budget cuts.”

“Oh. Right. Um.”

Heidi smiled brightly. “It’s nothing for you to worry about. We’ll be fine. We might just have to cut back a bit.”

Evan’s head popped up at that. Cut back a bit? If they cut back any more, they’d have nothing.

“Order less carryout,” Heidi went on. “That kind of thing.”

“Hence the cooking?”

Heidi nodded. "I almost waited for you to get home. This is an easy recipe. I could've shown you how to make it for yourself."

"Why didn't you?" Evan bristled at his tone. He hadn't meant for it to be that sharp. "I mean, it's early. We don't usually eat until six."

"I have class at six."

"Oh," Evan muttered.

"You won't be alone though. Jared's coming over."

Evan's head flew up so quickly it made him dizzy. "What?"

"His parents are going out, so I-"

"So, you invited him here?" Evan cringed at how squeaky he sounded.

"I thought it would be good for the two of you to..." Heidi put her spoon down and turned around to face him. "I know you feel... I know you feel alone sometimes and-"

"I'm used to it!"

"But you don't have to be! Jared's your friend."

"Family friend," Evan snapped.

Heidi pulled back to study him.

Evan looked away so it wasn't easy.

"It's not like I invited Zoe," Heidi said in a tone that was meant to be teasing.

Evan didn't find it funny. At all. He gave her a look that expressed that.

"My mom tried that once. I made the mistake of telling her I had a crush on this boy Nick and she-"

"I have homework."

"Evan..." Heidi let her breath out in a huff. "I'll call Eileen and cancel. I thought I was doing a good thing, but if you don't want Jared to come over..."

Evan didn't want Jared to come over, but he didn't feel like being harassed about Jared's lack of car insurance either.

"It's fine," Evan mumbled.

"Are you sure? I can tell Eileen you have too much homework tonight and-"

"It's fine!"

Heidi nodded slowly. "Okay."

She turned around to stir her sauce. "I've been thinking."

That was a dangerous statement. Evan eyed the door.

"It's still early in the school year. Why don't you try joining a club?"

Evan's stomach dropped. His eyes went wide.

Heidi smiled over her shoulder. "There has to be one you'd like. A science one, maybe? Or... I don't know. There are so many options these days. I can get a list from Ms. Ross and maybe we can one you'd like."

"I don't want to join a club."

"It was just an idea," Heidi shrugged. "Think about it. I'll email Ms. Ross just in case." She tasted the sauce and added some salt. "You're not alone, Evan. You know that, right? I'm here. Your dad..."

Evan patted the pocket where his phone was.

"He's only a phone call away."

Evan nodded like that was true.

"He wants you to come out there for Christmas this year," Heidi chirped. "Did I tell you that?"

Evan shook his head.

"Well, he does. He's going to pay for the tickets and everything."

"Oh. Great."

"It will be," Heidi promised. Something flashed across her face. "I read about that letter again. The one you..." She paused like she was waiting for him to deny it.

He didn't.

He didn't know why he didn't, but he kept his mouth shut.

She put the spoon down. "Can I read it? The rest of it, I mean. There's more to it, isn't there? They didn't read the whole thing on the air. I'd like to see it, if that's okay."

Evan's mind spun.

He spun around to face the door. "I have homework."

His mother stayed silent until he reached the stairs. "Dinner will be ready in five minutes. You'll have to reheat it when Jared gets here."

Evan nodded even though she couldn't see him.

Jared arrived at 6:15.

Evan took his time answering the door.

They stood there for a moment, staring and blinking and shifting around uncomfortably, until Jared produced a can of beans.

An actual can of beans.

He'd been holding it behind his back.

Evan let out a surprised chuckle. "What?"

"My mom always says you have to bring your host a gift," Jared shrugged. "Would you have preferred a can of corn?"

Evan shook his head as he led them to the kitchen.

"I almost wore a suit, but then I thought that would be weird."

"This whole thing is weird," Evan said.

"Yeah," Jared agreed. "I thought we were past the age where our mothers scheduled our play dates."

"At least now you'll get your insurance paid for."

Jared made a face. "That is yet to be determined."

"This isn't enough?"

Jared shrugged. "Do me a favor and tell your mom you had the time of your life."

"Now that would be weird."

"Eh..." Jared made another face. "You can't oversell these things when it comes to my folks." He nodded at the stove. "What's for dinner?"

"Pasta."

"I like pasta."

Evan got the plates.

Jared sat down. He rested his chin on his hands. "So, it's been brought to my attention that I may or may not be a total asshole."

“Really? Who said that?”

“Your girlfriend has quite a way with words.”

Evan nearly dropped the plates. “My... what?”

“Zoe,” Jared said as though that was obvious.

“Zoe called you a total asshole?”

Jared waved his hand in a so-so motion. “In a way.”

“What did she say?”

“That I’m a total asshole.”

Evan snorted.

Jared lifted a finger. “That I was acting like a total asshole.”

“There’s a difference?”

“A significant one. If it’s just an act, then there’s time to change.”

“And that’s what you’re doing?”

“That’s what I’m doing.”

“Hence the beans?”

“Hey,” Jared huffed. “I put a lot of thought into that gift.”

“You did?”

“Well, no. I went into the pantry and grabbed the first thing I saw. But it’s a start!”

Evan scooped some pasta onto his plate.

Jared did the same.

They ate in silence.

It wasn’t as awkward as it could’ve been.

Jared left at 8:15.

He lingered in the doorway for a minute.

A whole minute.

Evan almost asked if he was waiting for a kiss.

Almost.

Jared's expression was too serious for that kind of joke.

"Did you write it?"

Evan stared at his feet.

Jared opened his mouth to ask again. He changed his mind before he could.

Evan nodded slightly.

"Oh," Jared muttered. "So, I am a total asshole."

Evan glanced up in surprise.

Jared nodded to himself. "Good to know."

He turned on his heel to go.

Evan watched him drive away.

There were three text messages waiting for Evan when he got out of the shower. All from his mom.

Here's the list from Ms. Ross.

Your school has a nature club! That sounds perfect!

Denise called. Gail called out sick. I'm going to work for a few hours. Don't wait up.

Evan climbed in bed and stared at his phone.

He put his phone down and got his laptop instead.

It was time for the jazz show. Past time. It was already in progress.

"I'm freaking out here!"

"You are freaking out! Look at you. The unflappable Alana Beck is having a panic attack in my studio!"

"This isn't a panic attack!"

"It's not?"

"No! It's..." Alana huffed into her mic.

Evan's heart sped up. What was he thinking? He wasn't thinking. If he'd been thinking, he wouldn't have started listening.

He closed his laptop.

He opened his laptop.

Alana was still talking.

"Because I was bored!"

"You scrolled through 500 years in your calendar app because you were bored?"

"And restless. Don't tell me you've never been that restless."

"I have, Lanie, but wow. Okay. So, now you're freaking out because you'll be dead in 500 years?"

"Dead and forgotten."

"Not if you invent something fabulous."

"Even then. What could I possibly invent that people will remember in 500 years?"

"Okay, yeah, good point. But, hey, we're all in the same boat, right? Do you think anyone will remember me in 500 years? Forget 500. Try 50. Do you think anyone will remember this show in 50 years?"

"I will."

"Yeah, well, you, as always, are the exception not the rule."

"And what if I never have kids? My bloodline will cease to exist."

"Alice has that handled. The Beck line isn't going anywhere."

"But--"

"We have a caller! You're on with... We lost them."

"That keeps happening. Do you think it's a prank?"

"No idea. Time for a song. Is it time for a song?"

"It's time for me to go home." Alana yawned into her mic.

Evan's heart sped up.

His phone found its way into his hand before he could overthink what he was doing.

"We have another caller!"

Evan breathed into the phone.

He heard it on his laptop.

It made him jump.

What was he doing? He didn't know what he was doing or why he was doing it or how he'd managed to call the show. It was like an evil force had taken control of his body. Again.

He needed to erase the show's number. Erase it and block it.

"Hello? It doesn't look like we've lost you yet."

Evan took another breath. And jumped at the sound. "I..."

"That's a start. What's your name?"

"Evan."

"Evan?" Alana gasped.

Her brother shushed her. "What can we do for you tonight, Evan?"

Evan closed his eyes. It was now or never. It was like pulling off a band-aid. A band-aid that didn't have to be pulled off. A band-aid that was covering a can of beans.

"I... I heard you've been looking for me."

"Looking for you? What? What do you mean?"

"Evan," Alana breathed. He could hear her smile. "I'm so glad you called."

Connor

“He wrote it to himself.”

Connor didn’t move, didn’t budge, didn’t lift his head.

Alana didn’t take the hint. She sat down next to him.

The sound of her chair scraping across the floor forced him to open an eye.

Alana caught it immediately. “The letter. Evan wrote it to himself.”

Connor buried his face even deeper. There were less than two minutes left until class started. He intended to spend them in a state of semi-sleep.

“You said you wanted to know,” Alana reminded him.

“So, now I know,” Connor mumbled into his arms.

He waited for Alana to get up and move to her usual spot in the front of the room.

She didn’t budge.

He yawned and stretched and gave her a look that was sleepier than he would’ve liked.

It made her frown. “Are you okay? You’re not sick, are you? I can’t get sick. I have too much to do this week. I have-”

“I’m not sick.”

Alana did not look convinced.

And still, she didn’t leave.

“Why did you want to know?”

“What?” Connor asked, even though he knew what she was getting at. He knew exactly what she was getting at.

He didn’t know the answer. And it was way too early to work that one out.

“Why-” Alana started.

Ms. Thomas stood up. There was a remote in her hand.

A wave of excitement buzzed through the classroom.

Movie time.

Or, in Connor's case, time for a nap.

He didn't fall asleep. Not really. He remained in a state of semi-sleep while a group of scientists rambled on about climate change.

He made a half-hearted attempt at listening. Listening and absorbing. He didn't write anything down.

Alana took enough notes for the both of them. Painstakingly detailed notes.

So did Evan Hansen.

Connor wondered if he could borrow them.

Alana's notes, that was. Not Evan's.

He wasn't even sure how detailed Evan's notes really were. It was just that they looked extensive from across the room.

They looked extensive during the second – the half-second – Connor allowed himself to look that way.

It wasn't a surprise really. Everyone knew Evan Hansen was good at science. Their teachers were always pointing that out, always encouraging him to speak up when he knew the answer.

Which he usually did.

Everyone knew that.

Connor knew that.

He wasn't actually sure about the rest.

That was the thing about being a loner. He noticed things other people did not. At least he thought he did. It wasn't like he ever bothered to compare notes with anyone.

Who would he even ask?

Alana.

Alana was the obvious answer.

She'd love that. Adore it. Find a way to add it to her college application as an extracurricular.

Got the resident loner to talk.

That had to be worthy of admission somewhere.

Alana didn't linger after the bell rang.

It was for the best.

Connor buried the question – questions – he didn't get the chance to ask.

He was semi-successful.

He was curious against his will.

He'd always thought Evan Hansen was one of the good ones. The okay ones. The ones who didn't look at him like he was about to blow up the school.

He'd never given it much thought.

It was just one of those things. One of his automatic ways of classifying people.

He was stubborn like that. Once someone was in a category in his head, they stayed there.

Unless they gave him a reason to question it.

Like Evan had.

It was a roller coaster of questions and labels and conflicting possibilities.

Evan Hansen was a sarcastic asshole like Jared Kleinman. He was an awkward loner who didn't deserve to be shoved down. He was a clumsy weirdo who needed to stay away from trees. He was just as bad as the jocks who made fun of Connor when the teacher's back was turned.

He was worse than the jocks.

He was worse because he got it. He knew what it was like to be alone.

They were similar that way.

Connor had always thought they were similar.

Part of him still did.

Zoe didn't look up when he approached the car. Her face remained blank while she texted.

He tried the passenger's side door.

It didn't budge.

She lowered her phone. "Mom says you're not grounded."

He made his face go blank.

She tilted her head. “You don’t look surprised.”

Connor shrugged and tried the door again.

He eyed her keys.

She swung them while she studied his expression. “Sooo... what? You just didn’t feel like driving today? Or are you suddenly environmentally conscious?”

Connor clasped his hands together and pointed in her general direction. “That.”

“The environment?”

“Global warming. It’s going to kill us all.”

Zoe shook her head and unlocked the car.

She mumbled the word ‘weirdo’ under her breath.

Connor chose to ignore it.

The truth was that he didn’t want to be alone.

He was scared to be alone.

And being stuck in a car with his sister while she sang along loudly and purposely off-key to Justin Bieber because she knew it made his skin crawl was a step up from that.

A half-step.

A quarter-step.

It was better than being trapped in his head.

She smacked his hand away when he reached out again. “Driver controls the music!”

Connor slid down into a full sulk.

“You could’ve driven yourself, you know.”

“I know.”

“Is this like a preemptive thing? You did something and you know it’s only a matter of time before they figure it out, so you’re starting your punishment early in hope that it’ll make them lighten your sentence?”

Connor clasped his hands together and pointed. “That.”

Zoe furrowed her brow. “Really?”

Connor shrugged.

“What’d you do?”

He hadn’t done anything.

He shrugged again.

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye.

He didn’t blink.

“Mom!” Zoe shouted as they kicked off their shoes. “We’re home!”

Nothing.

No response.

They exchanged a look.

Her car was in the driveway.

The house smelled like onions.

Something was up.

They made their way to the kitchen.

Their mother was sitting at the table, laughing and showing their baby pictures to a stranger.

Connor dropped his bag on the floor.

That cut the laughter short.

Their mother jumped and smiled and didn’t close the book. “You’re home!”

Zoe made a beeline for the pantry. “I’m going to eat dinner in my room tonight. I have a paper due tomorrow and-”

“Your English paper?” Cynthia sighed. “Zoe. I told you to start that last-”

Zoe poked her head around the corner. “I started it the other day! I just...” She ducked back in to find a snack. “It’s going to be a long night.”

Cynthia shook her head and followed her daughter up the stairs.

Connor shifted from foot to foot. He weighed his options. He was hungry. Really hungry. Skipping lunch had a tendency to do that.

He had to pass his mother's friend to grab a Pop Tart.

He had enough sense to know he shouldn't do that without speaking.

Turning around and running to his room didn't require any words.

He glanced at the door.

"You must be Connor."

Trapped.

He was an animal trapped in a cage.

The woman smiled like she got that. "You go to school with my son. Evan... Evan Hansen. I'm his mom. Heidi. You can call me Heidi. Or Ms. Hansen. Whichever you prefer. Whichever one your parents prefer, I should say. Some parents are particular like that. Not me though. I've always told Evan to call my friends by their first names."

She sipped her coffee. "This is really good."

Connor stared at his feet.

Heidi Hansen.

Well, that figured.

That was his luck.

It was that kind of day.

He wondered how Evan Hansen's mother had found her way into his kitchen.

He didn't know how to ask.

She nodded at the papers in front of her. "Your mother was just showing me the ropes. I'm volunteering at the PTO bake sale tomorrow. It's silly, I know, but I didn't know these things were so complicated. There's a ledger! They keep track of the money in a ledger and now I'm realizing why I never signed up for this sort of thing before. It wasn't that I didn't have the time. It was the math! Somehow, deep down, I knew there was math! Math was the bane of my existence when I was your age and... I'm rambling."

"It's fine," Connor assured her.

Heidi nodded at her mug. "It's the coffee. I'm usually not this hyper."

"My mom likes it strong."

“She must need it strong. This place is...” Heidi let out a low whistle. “I can’t imagine keeping a place like this clean.”

“She has help.”

“Right,” Heidi muttered. “Of course, she does.”

“And she stays home, so there’s that.”

“There’s that,” Heidi echoed. She held up a plate. “Do you want a cookie?”

“Did my mom make them?”

Heidi nodded.

“I’m good.”

Heidi snorted. “It had never occurred to me that you could put zucchini in a cookie.”

“You can put zucchini in a lot of things.”

“I have a great recipe for zucchini bread,” Cynthia said as she swept back into the room. “I’ll print it for you if you’d like.” She squeezed Connor’s arm as she went by. “How was school?”

“Fine,” Connor mumbled.

“Fine? That’s all you have to say?”

Connor shrugged.

“Evan’s the same way,” Heidi smiled. “Some days I’m lucky to get a ‘fine’ out of him.”

“It’s the age,” Cynthia sighed. “The age and the fact that they’re boys. Zoe always tells me what’s happening.”

Connor glared at the floor.

Heidi cleared her throat. “So, I’m still not sure about this ledger. Can you explain the columns again?”

Cynthia checked the time. “If you don’t mind listening while I cook. I need to start dinner. You’re welcome to stay for it, if you’d like. You and Evan.”

Connor choked on his spit. “Evan?”

His mother gave him a look. “Her son. He’s in your grade.”

“I know, but... Is he here?” Connor looked around wildly. A part of him wondered if Evan was going to suddenly leap out of a cabinet.

Heidi shook her head. "I have to go pick him up in..." She glanced at her phone. "Twenty minutes. He's at Nature Club."

"Nature Club?" Cynthia smiled. "That sounds fun."

"I hope so." Heidi crossed her fingers. "It was my idea. If he hates it, I'm going to get the silent treatment for a week."

"At least he's participating in something." Cynthia nudged Connor as she went by.

Heidi gave him a sympathetic smile. "Reluctantly participating in something." She nodded at the ledger. "Which reminds me... The bake sale. I'm trying to lead by example. If I do something, he'll do something. Can you explain how the green column works again?"

Connor took that as his cue.

He grabbed a Pop Tart and bounded up the stairs.

He took them two at a time.

Connor banged on his wall to tell Zoe to turn down her music.

She banged back.

The volume decreased a bit. A tiny bit.

It was barely noticeable.

He thought about going over there, about storming into her room and yelling and screaming and turning her stereo off himself.

He got his earbuds out instead.

Such restraint.

Steve from The Sharing Circle would be so proud.

He opened his laptop and closed his laptop and stretched until he felt like he'd grown an inch.

He tapped his fingers together and looked around his room.

He jumped up without deciding to jump, without making a conscious decision to get off his bed.

He ran over to his closet and dug around until he found the box he was looking for.

The book was at the bottom.

His eighth-grade yearbook.

He hadn't seen it in years.

He hadn't thought about it in years.

He wasn't sure why he was thinking about it now.

He flipped through it until he found the page he wanted to see. The page the unconscious part of his brain wanted to see. It wasn't like there had been a stream of thoughts that led him there.

Evan Hansen hadn't contributed anything to their yearbook.

His page was blank.

No pictures, no collages, no dad jokes or inappropriate puns.

A blank page.

The only one in the class.

Even Connor had published a list of books.

He remembered thinking that was weird at the time.

Not weird.

Nice. In a weird way, it had felt nice.

It had made him feel less alone.

When they were in fourth grade, their teacher made them all write a paragraph about their best friend.

Connor hadn't had a best friend at the time.

He still didn't, but it was worse then.

He'd panicked when he heard the assignment. He'd fretted about it.

He got sent home early because it made his stomach hurt.

His mother helped him write the paragraph that night.

He wrote about Zoe.

Evan Hansen wrote about his father.

His father the superhero. He drew a cape and everything.

Connor didn't know why he remembered that, but he did.

It was just one of those things.

When Zoe got the assignment the next year, she wrote about Nicole.

And well...

That was that.

By sheer coincidence, Connor broke one of her Barbies when he heard.

It was an accident, of course.

It was definitely an accident.

No matter what Zoe said.

Dinner was quiet.

Painfully quiet.

Connor wished he'd decided to eat in his room too.

He didn't know why he hadn't. It was yet another thing he wished he could blame on the weed but couldn't because he was totally sober.

At the very least, he should've brought his phone down.

At least that would've given them something to talk about.

His mother would've yelled at him for using his phone at the dinner table. His father would've echoed the sentiment, even though he was openly using his.

Connor would've cursed them both out.

Good times.

It would've been better than the silence.

His mother stopped him before he could escape to his room.

"Help me do the dishes?"

He glanced over his shoulder.

His father had already disappeared - to his study no doubt.

His homework was done. He was between books. There was nothing he wanted to watch.

He shrugged and followed his mother to the sink.

She warmed up the water. "How was school?"

"Fine," they said together.

She grinned and snapped her fingers. "Jinx! You owe me a real answer."

Connor scraped his plate in the trash. He licked a bit of zucchini off his finger.

"Zoe said there's a dance this weekend. Have you ever thought about..." She shook her head at him. "Why are you looking at me like I suggested you go live on Mars?"

"Because you may as well have."

"You've never been to a dance."

"I know."

"So, how do you know you-"

"I know!"

Cynthia threw her hands up in surrender. "It was just a thought."

"Are you going to suggest I join the nature club next?"

"Not nature, no, but there has to be... Is there a book club at your school?"

Connor snorted at the suggestion.

"Or-"

"I think there's a vaping club. They meet behind the bleachers. It's not school-sanctioned, but-"

"Connor."

"What?"

Cynthia closed her eyes. "It wouldn't kill you to try something new."

"No, but it might make me kill myself."

Cynthia dropped the knife she'd been rinsing. It clattered around the sink. "I really wish you wouldn't say things like that."

“What?” Connor shrugged. “Would you rather I keep them in my head? Don’t you remember what Dr. George said? Or was it Dr. Herman? The one with the moustache. He said communication was key. I should always keep the lines of communication open and express what I’m-”

“Are you...” Cynthia squeezed her eyes shut. “Are you having those... those... Are you thinking... those-those thoughts? Are you-”

“Always.”

“Always?”

“Some days are worse than others.”

“Is today one of them?”

Connor waved his hand in a so-so motion. “On a scale from one to ten, I’m currently at a two.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“I was at an eight this morning.”

“And eight is-”

“Bad,” Connor confirmed. “It passed quickly. Zoe listened to ABBA in the car and it took me down to a six. I was at a four by the time the bell rang.”

“That sounds exhausting.”

“It is.”

Cynthia looked like she wanted to hug him.

Connor braced himself for impact.

She hugged herself instead. “You know Heidi, Evan’s mom. Your classmate’s mom.”

Connor nodded to show he remembered the woman he’d met three hours ago.

“She said... I don’t know if I should be saying this. It’s not... Don’t spread it around.”

Connor pretended to zip his lips.

“We got to talking and, well, she mentioned that Evan struggles with... He has some things he struggles with too. His therapist has him writing letters to himself.”

Connor’s throat felt dry. “Letters to-”

“Himself,” Cynthia nodded. “They’re meant to be pep talks, Heidi said. And to help him process things. She thinks they’re working.”

Connor snorted. "So, now you want me to start writing to myself? 'Dear Connor Murphy.... Today's going to be a great day because...' You want me to start writing shit like that?"

Cynthia flinched at his tone. "It was just a thought."

"Right..."

"I want to help you, sweetie. That's all I want. I could use some guidance if you have any."

Connor stared at his feet.

"Is there anything you think would help?"

Connor shrugged.

"An appointment with Dr. Miller?"

"I hated Dr. Miller."

"I thought he was the one you liked."

Connor considered that for a moment. "Was he the one with the earring?"

Cynthia nodded.

"He was okay."

Cynthia beamed at that. "You said you thought he was cool."

Connor was positive he hadn't said that.

Dr. Miller had been the best of the bunch though. If he had to see someone, it may as well be him.

"Maybe. I'll think about it."

"I'll make an appointment, just in case."

Connor shrugged at his feet.

"And why don't you try-"

"I'm not writing a fucking letter to myself!"

Cynthia threw her hands up in surrender. She took a breath. "I just... I just want to make sure you know... you know you're important, sweetie. You're so important. If something happened to you..."

For a second, Connor was sure she was going to cry.

She didn't. She found a way to regain her composure. "Anything. Anything we can do to keep you at a one." She tilted her head. "That's the good one, right? One is good, ten is bad?"

"One is good. Impossible but good."

"Nothing is impossible."

"Two is as good as it gets."

Cynthia kissed the top of his head. "Let's aim for one."

"Zoe! You're still up?"

"Obviously."

Connor snorted at his sister's tone. He rolled over so he could better hear the argument that was about to take place outside his door.

"I thought you'd gone to bed. What... Is that coffee?"

"I'm still writing my paper!"

"It's eleven o'clock!"

"Hence the coffee. I need to stay awake."

"I told you to start that paper-"

"I started it last weekend! I've been having some serious brain rot."

"Why don't you go to sleep now and get up early to finish it?"

"I'd rather finish it now."

"How long is it going to take?"

"A couple hours."

"A couple... Zoe."

"Mom, please. You're just slowing me down."

"It's that band, isn't it? We've talked about this. School comes first."

"School always comes first!"

"Maybe you should take a year off."

"Off school?"

“Off the band.”

“I... No. No way. I’m not quitting the band. That is not an option.”

“It is if-”

“No, nope, not happening.”

Connor snorted when he heard his sister’s door slam shut.

There was a moment of silence.

He switched his lamp off and rolled over to face the wall.

His door creaked open.

He could feel his mother watching him pretend to sleep.

Watching and smiling.

For tonight and tonight only, he was the good kid.

Connor smothered a yawn with his hand and turned the volume back up.

The song was over.

The crazy, metallic, tinfoil-sounding song was over.

Alana’s brother had the weirdest fucking taste in music.

Seriously.

If this was jazz, Zoe and her friends were freaks.

Interesting freaks but freaks nonetheless.

Connor wondered if it was too late for him to learn an instrument.

That was the exhaustion talking.

It was late.

He needed to sleep.

He couldn’t sleep.

Alana’s brother yammered on about his love for cereal.

Connor tuned him out until he started begging for people to call in.

“It’s creepy in here tonight,” Alan said. “I feel like I’m in a horror movie. Alone in a horror movie. This will be the last time I cover the late shift. There’s no one here. No one. Even Phil went home. Even Lanie went home. Lanie’s asleep. I bet she’s sound asleep. A solid eight hours, that girl.”

He breathed into the mic. “Come on, people. Talk to me. What’s on your mind?”

He breathed again. “Talk to me or I’m putting ‘The Wagon Wheel’ on repeat until Kate gets here. I’ll do it. Don’t test me. I’ll do it. I’ll... Oh, thank God! A caller! You’re on with Alan the soon-to-be-murdered-by-a-psycho-in-a-mask.”

Connor breathed into his phone.

He heard it in his earbud.

He hung up.

“That isn’t funny! The least you could’ve done was ask about my favorite scary movie. Come on, people. When you do something, commit.”

There was a rustling sound before Alan went on. “This is that same number too. The one that keeps calling and hanging up. If this is a prank, it’s a pretty lousy one. If this is a secret admirer, you know you attract more bees with-”

Connor’s phone rang.

He dropped it like it was hot.

Which somehow caused the call to be accepted.

He cursed and dove across his bed to change that.

“Got you!” Alan cried triumphantly. “Come on. Person up. What’s on your mind?”

“The letter.”

Connor flinched when he heard himself.

He hadn’t meant to say anything.

And he hadn’t been thinking about the letter. Not actively at least. Not with anything that resembled words.

“The letter,” Alan repeated. “Our real crowd pleaser.”

“Crowd pleaser?” Connor scoffed. “That’s what you’d call it?”

“Not in the traditional sense, no, but we’ve discussed it at length here at ‘The Jazz Club with Alan Beck.’ Do you have something to add?”

“You think it was a cry for help?”

“A cry? No. Not necessarily. I think the person who wrote it-”

“Evan.”

“Yes. Evan. I think-”

“You don’t think he wrote it to get attention?”

“No.”

Connor blinked at his laptop, at the articles in *The letter* tag.

The articles he’d read more times than he cared to admit.

“Have you read the whole thing?”

“Yes.”

“Me too.”

There was a pause.

“So, what’s on your mind?”

“What if today isn’t a great day? Or tomorrow? Or the day after that? What if this is all there is? Nothing changes, nothing gets better. What if you just keep going along, living your life, hurting everyone you love? What if you’re the bad guy? The villain. Everyone’s least favorite burden. What if you never do anything worth doing? What if you aren’t capable of doing anything worth doing? What then? Do you give up? Should you just throw in the towel and-”

Connor ended the call.

He yanked the earbud out and practically threw his laptop across the room.

What was that?

He didn’t know what had possessed him to go off like that.

He sank back into his pillows and stared at the ceiling.

There were stars up there. They danced when he was high.

He wished they were dancing now.

His door flew open.

He closed his eyes.

The door clicked shut. Softly. So as not to wake their parents.

“Did you mean that?”

Connor shrugged. He refused to meet his sister's stare.

"I was so mad when I heard your phone ring. I was like really? He can't even let me have this. Jazz. Music. The one thing that's mine."

The edge of his bed sank as she sat down.

He scooted back to make room.

He didn't look in her direction.

"But that... You really feel like that?"

Connor shrugged again.

He let his eyes drift her way.

She was chewing her lip and studying him like he was an Algebra problem. "I'm going to hug you now."

She scooted over to do just that.

Connor let her.

For the first time in a long time, possibly ever, he leaned in.

Alana

“Is that coffee for me?”

Alana stepped to the side so Zoe could get into her locker. “I got an extra shot of espresso. Thought you could use it.”

Zoe stared at the cup like it was the Holy Grail. “You are officially my new favorite person. My new best friend. I’m making you a friendship bracelet tonight. And, ooh, secret handshake! We need one of those too!”

Alana’s cheeks felt impossibly warm. She lowered her head to hide her face. “I bet Nicole would love to hear that.”

Zoe wrinkled her nose. “You’re allowed to have more than one best friend. Weren’t you a girl scout too? *Make new friends but keep the old. One is silver and the other’s gold.*”

Two boys turned around when Zoe finished singing.

She lifted her cup to toast them.

Alana sipped her tea. “Did you finish your paper?”

“Barely,” Zoe yawned. “Connor and I were up until one working on it.”

Alana’s eyebrows flew up of their own accord. “You and Connor?”

“Yeah,” Zoe laughed. “I know.”

“And it didn’t end in bloodshed?”

“Amazingly no. He even rewrote my conclusion for me. Which reminds me...” She chewed her lip. “I should probably read it before I turn it in, shouldn’t I? I mean, it’s Connor. There’s probably an eighty percent chance it’s plagiarized or about, like, weed or something.”

“I don’t know. I read his paper on *The Crucible* last year. It was good.”

Zoe blinked as she considered that.

She looked surprised.

That made Alana sad for reasons she couldn’t quite place.

“So.”

“So?”

“Did you hear? You know. You already know, don’t you?”

Zoe tilted her head. “What?”

“You know already, don’t you? You heard?”

Zoe shook her head dazedly. “I need another shot of espresso.”

“Alan’s show,” Alana whispered. “You heard? You listened to it last night?”

Zoe’s eyes went wide.

“He sent it to me this morning. I went to bed early last night...” Alana closed her eyes.
“Connor. That was Connor, wasn’t it?”

Zoe spun around to face her locker. Her hands shook as she fumbled with the lock.

“Is he... You were with him? All night or-”

“Zo-zo!” Nicole squealed as she bounced over to them.

Literally bounced.

Alana wondered how many shots of espresso she’d had.

Nicole ran a hand across her shirt. “I spilled in the car. Is it obvious?”

Zoe offered Alana an apologetic smile before shifting into best friend mode. “Not if you wear a scarf.”

“A scarf?” Nicole huffed. “It’s like a million degrees outside.”

“How about a necklace?” Alana suggested. “A really big one, like the ones my grandmother used to wear. I bet they have some in the prop closet.”

Nicole pulled back to look at Alana.

Really look.

Like she’d just noticed her presence.

She tilted her head at Zoe. “Am I interrupting something?”

Zoe shook her head and closed her locker. “Jenny has a stain stick in her backpack.”

Nicole clapped her hands excitedly. “See! This is why I need my Zo-zo fix. I can’t function on my own.”

Zoe rolled her eyes. “Come on. The bell’s about to ring.”

She offered Alana another apologetic smile.

A can-we-talk-about-this-later smile.

It was more than a little relieved.

Alana returned it anyway.

Zoe didn't notice.

She was too busy consoling her golden friend.

Alana didn't have a golden friend. Which was fine. It was totally fine.

She had acquaintances.

And friends.

She had friends.

Zoe was her friend. Evan was her friend. Jared was her...

Those last two were a bit of a stretch.

Acquaintances. Close acquaintances. That was more like it.

She didn't throw the friend label around lightly.

Tracy was her friend.

Emphasis on the was?

Alana wasn't sure.

She still saw Tracy all the time. They were in all the same classes.

And that was it.

They didn't eat lunch together because of John. They didn't see each other after school because of cheerleading. They didn't hang out on the weekend because of John and cheerleading and Alana's extracurriculars. Her many, many extracurriculars.

Because Alana had a life.

A real life. One filled with meaning and charity and goals.

She'd thought Tracy wanted the same.

She'd thought that was the reason they got along.

She hated being wrong.

Contrary to what Tracy seemed to believe, Alana didn't spend every lunch period working.

Even she had her limits. Even she needed time to destress.

Empty classrooms were good for that. She asked Ms. Thomas if she could borrow hers. She said it was so she could look at some slides but really she just wanted to veg. Veg and chill and destress.

Ms. Thomas didn't pry.

It was enough to make her Alana's favorite teacher, even if science was not her favorite class. Not even close. It was in the top six. Maybe.

She dropped the act as soon as Ms. Thomas left for the lounge. She put her headphones on and scrolled through her phone. Aimlessly scrolled. She didn't check her email or anything that would guilt her into being productive.

She lost track of time.

It was glorious.

The door opened.

She dove forward to look at the microscope.

She dropped the act when she saw who it was.

Jared didn't look nearly as surprised to see her as she was to see him.

He frowned around the room. "Is there a club meeting in here?"

He looked terrified, like he thought she was about to rope him into picking up trash on the highway.

She was tempted to play that up.

She decided to be good.

She shook her head. "Just me."

"Just you?" Jared did not look convinced.

"You want my celery sticks? My mom always forgets they make me gag."

"Your mom still packs your lunch?" Jared pretended to gasp. "The Great Alana Beck still needs her mommy to-"

"Do you want them or not?"

"Not. Celery makes me gag."

Alana chuckled.

Jared did too. He pulled up a chair. “So.” He nodded at the microscope. “What’s the extra credit and can I get in on it? I’m like 99% sure I failed that pop quiz.”

Alana nibbled on her sandwich. “I’m just eating.”

“You’re just eating?” Jared studied her like he was trying to find the catch.

She shrugged.

“In here?” Jared raised her eyebrows. “Afraid you’ll gag on the cheerleaders?”

Alana poked at her bag.

“Because I wouldn’t blame you if you are. That’s a legitimate concern for you these days.”

Alana tilted her head.

“Because you’re friends with cheerleaders now.”

Jared’s face grew increasingly uncertain as the silence dragged on. He tilted his head to mirror Alana’s.

Alana closed her eyes and popped a chip in her mouth. “Do you see any cheerleaders here?”

Jared chuckled awkwardly. “Gracie looks like she could’ve shaken the poms around back in her day.”

Gracie, the plastic skeleton hanging in the back of the room.

Alana snorted and offered him a chip.

He happily accepted. “That’s more like it.”

Alana shook her head. “I don’t know why my mom keeps pushing the celery.”

“Because she wants you to live a long and healthy life? That’s what mine says.”

Alana wrinkled her nose and popped another chip.

Jared glanced around the room. “You haven’t seen Evan, have you?”

“Evan?” Alana shook her head.

“He eats in here sometimes.”

“Did you check the library? I saw him there the other day.”

Jared hummed at that.

“Do you need him for something or...”

Jared let his breath out in a huff. “I’m trying this thing.”

“What thing?”

“This new thing.”

Alana nodded for him to go on.

“I’m trying to be a decent person. A decent friend.”

His voice shook at the word ‘friend.’

Alana pretended to be fascinated by her orange.

Jared stared at her for a beat.

A long beat.

Alana squirmed in her seat. “What?”

“Nothing.”

Alana gave him a look.

“It’s just...”

Alana motioned for him to go on.

“You’re sitting in a classroom by yourself. That doesn’t seem like a very Alana Beck thing to do.”

“It’s a very Alana Beck thing to do, seeing as how I’m Alana Beck and I’m doing it!”

Jared shrugged and drummed his fingers on the desk.

Alana offered him an orange slice.

He waved it off.

“Aren’t you afraid of getting scurvy?”

He sighed and held out his hand.

“It’s a lot sometimes,” Alana said.

Jared nodded knowingly. “Being Alana Beck?”

Alana nodded.

“You want me to leave?”

Alana shrugged.

He didn’t budge. “You want to talk about it?”

Alana shook her head.

Jared pulled a cookie out of his bag. He offered her a piece.

She took it with a smile.

The library was packed. Every table was taken. Every table but not every chair.

Alana had two options.

Evan or Connor.

The only other seniors she saw. Her only available acquaintances.

There was room at both of their tables.

Because they were both sitting alone.

Of course, they were.

It was an easy choice.

Connor was hunched over his work in a way that screamed ‘keep away.’

Evan glanced up long enough for her to take it as an invitation.

She hurried over before he could put his backpack on the extra chair. “This seat taken?”

Evan shook his head.

She sat herself down. “Are you working on the science homework too?”

“I’m waiting for my mom.”

“Oh,” Alana nodded. She pulled her laptop out and opened her report.

“She’s running late.”

There was an unspoken ‘again’ there. A loud upspoken ‘again.’

Alana smiled slightly. “I’d offer you a ride, but I have to finish this report before I go home.”

She couldn't go home until her work was done. The twins were having a playdate. It would take days for the house to recover.

"It's okay," Evan muttered. He checked his phone.

She didn't have to see it to know there was nothing there.

She pursed her lips and tried to think of a polite way to ask if he was okay. Polite and subtle and kind.

She didn't want to mess this up.

He looked at her like he knew what she was thinking.

They both looked away.

"I heard your brother's show last night."

Alana's head popped up. "You did?"

Evan shrugged. His eyes remained resolutely on his book.

She waited for him to go on.

"Do you know who... That caller. The one who... I keep thinking about it and-"

"Connor," Alana whispered. "It was Connor."

"Connor Murphy?"

Alana nodded.

Evan somehow looked surprised and unsurprised at the same time.

His phone buzzed.

"My mom's here." His mouth opened and closed several times, but nothing came out.

He left without saying another word.

"What did you say about me?"

Alana bristled at Connor's tone. She rubbed her forehead and closed her laptop.

Two sentences. She'd managed to type two sentences before Connor sat down.

She considered playing dumb.

One look at Connor told her that would be a mistake.

He was not in the mood for games.

She folded her hands in front of her. “Nothing.”

“Don’t fuck with me.”

The librarian spun around to glare at them.

A freshman eyed Connor warily.

Connor didn’t notice.

His eyes never left Alana.

She made a point of keeping her voice low. “I’m not fucking with you.”

Connor sighed and folded his arms across his chest. “You expect me to believe you-”

“He asked if I knew who called Alan last night. That’s it. I swear.”

Connor stewed on that for a moment. “What did you say?”

“I told him it was you.”

Connor slammed his arm down on the table.

Alana narrowed her eyes. “Are you trying to get us kicked out of the library?”

Connor drummed his fingers on the table.

He refused to look in Alana’s direction.

She focused on her notes. “Do you remember what Ms. Thomas said about-”

“You just love sticking your nose in other people’s business, don’t you?”

Alana closed her eyes and breathed.

“This has nothing to do with you and yet you keep-”

“Nothing to do with me?” Alana scoffed. “You called into my brother’s show!”

“Right. Your *brother’s* show. It’s still *The Jazz Club with Alan Beck*, isn’t it? They didn’t change it to *The Jazz Club with Alana Beck* or *The Jazz Club with The Beck Siblings* or-”

“It’s Alan’s show, but I’m part of it. I’m on several times a week.”

“You weren’t there last night.”

Alana raised her eyebrows. “So, you wouldn’t have called in if I had been?”

Connor glared at the wall.

“You’ve called in other nights. Alan said you’re the caller who keeps calling and hanging up. What’s up with that? I’ve never known you to hold back when you have something to say.”

“Right.” Connor rolled his eyes. “Because you know me so well.”

“I know you as well as you know me.”

Connor’s jaw twitched at that.

“I’ve gotten to know Evan pretty well this year,” Alana went on. “He’s really...”

Alana struggled to find the right word. Words. Evan deserved more than one.

“Cool?” Connor huffed.

Alana snorted. “No.”

“Nice?”

Alana nodded slightly. “Yeah. Nice and... If you want to get to know him-”

“What makes you think I want to get to know him?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe the fact that you’re obsessed with his letter.”

“I’m not obsessed. You’re obsessed.”

Alana continued on like he hadn’t spoken. “His words struck a chord with you too.”

Connor didn’t deny it.

“I’m just saying, if you were interested in, I don’t know, being his friend or something, it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world for you. For either of you. It might even be good.”

Connor pushed away from the table.

He left without saying a word.

It gave Alana a sense of déjà vu.

Alana almost left the second she got home.

She was seriously tempted to make a run for it, to go somewhere, anywhere, where she didn’t have to look at the aftermath of the twins’ playdate.

It was bad.

Toys everywhere. Dress ups everywhere. Crayons everywhere.

It reminded her of *Home Alone*. She practically had to hopscotch her way across the floor.

Her sisters were in the kitchen. The twins were nowhere to be found.

Alice looked up when she came in. "You're home late."

Alana's stomach twisted. She knew that tone. Alice had been banking on the idea that she'd come home after school and chaperone the playdate.

Her sisters gave her a disappointed look.

She breezed by without acknowledging them.

It felt good.

She didn't expect it to last.

She bounded down the stairs to her room and threw herself onto her bed.

She didn't notice Alan until he started to laugh. She rolled over to look him in the eye. "Laundry day?"

"Laundry day," Alan confirmed. He closed the dryer and came to perch on her bed. "I got a letter today."

Alana pulled herself up. "A letter. What kind of letter?"

Her heart sped up. Did they have a copycat on their hands? She wasn't sure if she could handle that.

Alan pulled a paper out of his pocket. He handed it to her without saying a word.

Dear Alan,

I need some advice and I think you might be the best person to ask.

I feel like I'm losing my best friend. I feel like she's pulling away and I don't know why.

Scratch that.

I know why. I know it's on me. I know my life has changed in ways that are pushing us apart. I have a boyfriend and a new hobby and you know what?

Screw this.

Screw anonymity.

This is Tracy and I'm talking about Alana.

I've screwed everything up and I don't know what to do.

Any advice you have would be greatly appreciated.

Alan wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "So, sister dear, how do you think I should answer that?"

Alana's hands shook as she read it again.

And again.

She didn't know what to say.

Alan played with his phone.

The basement door creaked open.

Alana braced herself for impact, for Alice to fuss or Alicia to groan or the twins to scream.

Nothing.

She looked up.

Tracy paused at the bottom of the stairs. She looked between the siblings. Her eyes went wide like she was putting the pieces together.

The silence lasted an eternity.

An eternal minute.

Alan snatched Alana's brush off her nightstand and held it up like it was a microphone. "Looks like we have another caller here at *The Jazz Club with Alan Beck*. What's on your mind?"

He held the brush out to Tracy.

She took a step back.

He smiled and tried again. "What's your name, caller?"

"Tracy," she managed to squeak.

Alan nodded solemnly. He silently asked Alana for permission to proceed.

She shrugged like she didn't care.

Alan didn't buy that for a second. He stood up, brush in hand. "Go ahead, Tracy. We're listening."

Zoe

“Are you sure there’s nothing there? I feel like there’s something there. I feel it on my face. It’s all over my face. Oh my God. I have Jacob Hopper’s spit all over my face. It’s seeping in. My skin’s absorbing it. I’m going to be a mutant and... there’s nothing there, is there?”

“Nope,” Zoe snorted.

Nicole rubbed her cheeks until they were red. “But I can feel it.”

“It wasn’t that much spit.”

Nicole stopped in her tracks to glare. “Why didn’t you warn me?”

“About what?”

“The spit!”

“It wasn’t that much spit!”

“Boys are gross.” Nicole wrinkled her nose. “Jazz band boys are gross.”

“It was like one drop. And you did it to yourself. Everyone knows not to go near the trumpeters when they’re-”

“Trumpeters,” Nicole laughed. “Oh my God. You’re such a...” Her mouth snapped shut when she caught Zoe’s eye. “Dedicated musician.”

Zoe rolled her eyes. “Nice.”

“It was a compliment!”

“Uh huh.”

Nicole chewed her lip. “So, what now?”

“Now?”

“You heading home or...”

“Or?”

“You want to come over for a bit?”

Zoe smiled apologetically. “I have a lab report to finish.”

“Pfft,” Nicole scoffed. “Do it during homeroom like a normal person.”

“I need to get my chem grade up. Mom keeps threatening to make me quit the band.”

“And that would be bad?”

“Really bad.”

“The world would end?”

“My world would end.”

Something flashed across Nicole’s face.

Zoe raised her eyebrows. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“That wasn’t nothing.”

“It’s just...” Nicole shook her head. “Nothing.”

Zoe put a hand on her hip. “And you say I’m evasive.”

“Evasive?” Nicole snorted. “Someone’s been studying for the SATs.”

“Evasive isn’t a SAT word. It’s a word-word.”

Nicole fiddled with her backpack.

They walked out of the school in silence.

“So...” Nicole drawled.

“So?”

“Group hang at Jenny’s tomorrow night. You in?”

“Is she going to make us watch *Glee*?”

“That’s a very real possibility, yes,” Nicole nodded.

Zoe made a face.

“It’ll be fun!” Nicole insisted. “We can make popcorn and throw it at the tv every time something stupid happens.”

“That’s a waste of popcorn.”

“Some sacrifices are worth it.”

Zoe paused at the bottom of the stairs. “Hey.”

Nicole tilted her head.

Zoe let her breath out in a huff. "I hope you weren't too bored."

It took Nicole a second to follow that. "At your practice?"

Zoe nodded.

"It was my decision to go."

"I know, but--"

"I felt like it was the only way I'd get to see you outside of class."

Zoe smiled apologetically. "I've been busy."

"We've noticed."

Zoe stared at her feet. She didn't point out that Maya and Jenny hadn't resorted to following her to band practice yet.

She snapped her fingers when a thought popped into her head. "You should join the band!"

"Yeah, right," Nicole huffed.

"I'm serious!"

"And play what? Unless you're in dire need of a triangle player..."

Zoe closed her eyes. Nicole was right. She knew she was right. She knew Nicole was not the musical type at all.

"This weekend," Zoe decided. "You, me, shopping spree."

"I do need new jeans," Nicole nodded slowly.

"Then it's settled."

Nicole smiled a smile that didn't meet her eyes.

Zoe couldn't blame her.

She wasn't convinced it would happen either.

Connor looked up when she approached.

His face was blank, unreadable in a way that made Zoe freeze.

Every time she thought they were past this...

She hadn't really thought they were past this. One good night did not fix years of distance.

Distance was putting it nicely.

Zoe always tried to be nice.

She loved her brother. Really, she did. Sometimes she even liked him.

She wished he was an easier person to be nice to.

She swung her keys as she approached the car. “You know you can always take the bus if you don’t feel like waiting for me.”

Connor looked at her like she’d sprouted another head.

Which was fair.

The idea of Connor taking a yellow school bus home made her laugh.

He narrowed his eyes like he didn’t get the joke but knew it was at his expense.

Her laughter settled into a smile. “What do you do while I’m at practice?”

Connor’s spine went rigid. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, what do you-”

“Nothing.”

Zoe rolled her eyes. “This is me asking, not Mom.”

Connor yanked the door handle so hard it popped.

Zoe unlocked it with a sigh.

There was a note waiting for them on the counter.

A hastily scribbled *leftovers in the fridge*.

Zoe wondered what catastrophe had caused their mother to run out the door like that.

Or sale.

There was a very real chance there was a sale somewhere.

Zoe hoped it wasn’t on mung beans again.

She checked the fridge and closed the fridge and turned around to tell Connor it was worse than she’d thought.

He wasn’t there.

Which was fine.

It was totally fine.

It was way too early for dinner.

And it wasn't like it was her responsibility to feed her brother anyway.

Connor banged on the wall around six.

Zoe closed her laptop and went to the door. "You rang?"

"I knocked," Connor corrected.

"You know, most people choose to knock on doors, not walls."

"The wall was closer."

"Yeah, but then you had to leave your room and come to my door and-"

"I've never claimed to be normal."

Zoe hummed at that.

"I'm hungry."

"Sucks to be you."

Connor gave her a look.

"I could eat."

"Louie's?"

"Louie's," Zoe agreed. "I assume I'm driving."

"I'll drive."

Zoe raised her eyebrows.

"I'm not being punished!"

Zoe hummed again.

That was true. She knew it was true. Both of their parents had confirmed it.

She knew Connor was choosing not to drive himself to school for whatever Connor reason he had.

She shrugged like she didn't find the whole thing weird. "Okay."

"Okay," Connor breathed.

Louie's was surprisingly crowded for a weeknight.

Zoe glanced at Connor to gauge his reaction. "You want to get it to go?"

"Then we'll have to burn the evidence."

"Or put it in the trashcan outside. Why do you always go straight to fire?"

Connor pulled out his phone. "What do you want?"

"Cheeseburger, extra fries, no onions."

"Side salad?"

"Extra pickle. That counts as something green, right?"

"There's lettuce on the burger," Connor reminded her.

"See! Greens! I'm good."

Connor tapped in their order. "Fifteen minutes."

"You want to wait inside?"

Connor looked so conflicted it made her snort.

He opened his door without a word.

She followed him out before he could lock her in.

Her stomach growled when they reached the counter. Milkshakes. She'd forgotten about Louie's milkshakes. The smell was intoxicating.

She spun around on her stool like she was five.

Connor looked at her like she was three.

She grabbed the counter to regain her balance. "What?"

Connor shrugged.

She looked around the room.

There was a soccer team celebrating in the back. She remembered those days.

She didn't say anything because Connor did not.

He'd never been on a team. Never played a sport. Never had a double chocolate milkshake to celebrate or mourn a game.

She didn't know if it was the hunger speaking, but that made her kind of sad.

She glanced around again.

She nearly fell off her stool when she saw them.

Evan and Jared and a trio of adults that had to be their parents. She knew the one on the left was Evan's mom.

Connor spotted them a second after she did. "I'll be in the car."

He left before she could respond.

She watched him go.

She considered going after him, but the thought of spending twelve minutes in his car was not appealing. At all. It was even worse than sitting at a sticky counter by herself.

She pulled out her phone.

She put away her phone.

She made a choice.

Evan noticed her first. He lowered his head.

Which made Jared raise his. "Hey!"

The adults turned to look.

Evan's mom smiled warmly. "Zoe! It is Zoe, right?"

"It's Zoe," she confirmed.

Evan's mom looked at her son, winked at her son.

Evan looked like he wanted to die.

Jared cleared his throat. "Hey. We have that thing."

"That thing?" Zoe frowned.

"In the car. The thing in the car. The thing you want to borrow." He elbowed Evan until he took the hint and slid out of the booth. "We'll be right back."

Jared led the way outside. He spun around to face Evan. "You're welcome."

Evan stopped in his tracks. "For what?"

"For getting Oe-zay away from your om-may."

Evan's brow furrowed even more.

Zoe rolled her eyes. "I'm fluent in Pig Latin."

Jared snorted at that.

An awkward silence fell over them.

Zoe didn't ask why Jared had felt the need to extract them from the diner.

She knew the answer.

Sort of.

She had her suspicions.

Because there's Zoe...

Evan had written about her.

She didn't know what that meant.

Correction, she knew what that meant.

She had her suspicions.

It was entirely possible she was off base. Way off base. Not even in the same town as the ballpark.

And yet...

She got the feeling her gut was right. Evan liked her. Had a crush on her? Thought she was some kind of magical, mystical, perfect princess of a girl?

She wasn't.

She hoped he'd realized that by now.

She hoped they could be friends.

More than friends?

She didn't want a boyfriend who put her on a pedestal. There was nowhere to go but down.

She wasn't even sure she wanted a boyfriend. Or a girlfriend. Or anything that required commitment. Her life was complicated enough without all that.

Someday, maybe. If the right person came along. The right person at the right time.

She hadn't had much luck in that department.

Austin Jordan did not count.

She glanced around the parking lot.

Connor was watching them, glaring at them through his sunglasses.

His face was blank.

Part of her expected him to do a wheelie out of the parking lot and leave her stranded.

At least she'd have a ride home if he did. Two rides. Two potential cars she could get in if her brother took off.

She blinked when she realized the boys were talking.

To her?

She wasn't sure.

The answer seemed to be no though.

Jared was rambling on about something his brother had done to his shoes. Evan was nodding like it mattered.

Which maybe it did.

Zoe hadn't been paying enough attention to tell.

Her phone buzzed.

Connor.

Food's ready

She raised her eyebrows at him.

Louie's was fast, but not that fast.

He honked the horn.

She narrowed her eyes.

He flashed the lights.

Evan and Jared turned to see.

Evan's eyes went wide. "Is that..."

“Connor,” Zoe confirmed. “We’re picking up dinner. He says it’s ready.”

“Oh.”

Jared gave him a look. A confused look.

Zoe did too.

She chewed her lip and nodded at the door. “I should...”

Jared’s face broke into a sarcastic grin. “This was fun. Let’s do it again sometime!”

“What did you say about me?”

Zoe threw the bags of food in the back. “The food wasn’t ready. I had to sit there waiting while the world’s loudest toddler threw a tantrum.”

“What did you-”

“I mean, I could’ve gone over and waited with Evan and Jared and their families, but I didn’t want to interrupt.”

Any more than she already had. Pretending to text for eight minutes had been preferable to that.

“You talked to them.”

“Yeah,” Zoe shrugged. “I talk to a lot of people. You should try it sometime.”

“What did you-”

“Nothing.”

Connor narrowed his eyes.

“Would you please do us all a favor and get over yourself? Not everything’s about you.”

Connor started the car. Quickly, fiercely.

Zoe was glad she was already buckled in.

She checked her phone so she didn’t have to meet his stare. “Mom’s home.”

They exchanged a look.

United. Just like that.

Zoe chewed her lip and tapped her fingers along the window.

The leaves were falling. It was a beautiful night.

“Okay... I have an idea.”

“Go left.”

“We’ve already gone left.”

“Not this left.”

Connor stopped the car and pointed. “That fence over there. We’ve passed it twice.”

“Have not!”

“Have so!”

Zoe popped a fry in her mouth. “Have...” She tilted her head. “Huh.”

“It’s not down that road.”

“Go right then.”

“We’ve already gone right.”

“Have not.” She grinned at Connor’s glare. “My navigational skills may need some work.”

“That implies you have some to begin with.”

Zoe threw a fry at him.

He caught it and ate it with a smirk.

“You want to eat here?”

“Here?” Connor gestured around the road.

“It’s as good a spot as any.”

“It’s dark here.”

“It’s dark everywhere.”

“It’s dark. We’re in the middle of nowhere.” Connor ticked his thoughts off on his fingers.

“That clearing over there looks like something out of a horror movie.”

“Yeah, but I haven’t heard about any chainsaw massacres happening around these parts, have you?”

Connor put the car in park. “I’m hungry.”

“So, eat.”

Connor took a bite of his burger. “I think the orchard closed.”

Zoe did a double take. “What?”

“Dad said something about it a while ago.”

“And you’re just telling me this now?”

“I thought he was wrong. I thought you’d looked it up.”

“I tried! I couldn’t remember its name and... Closed? That’s sad. I always liked that place.”

“Me too.”

Zoe did another double take.

“Would you stop looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like...” Connor’s hand flopped from side to side.

Zoe nodded like she got it.

Which she did.

She knew what he was getting at.

She sipped her soda. “When was the last time we came out here?”

Connor didn’t respond.

She didn’t push. She didn’t ask if he’d heard her or look to see if he was listening. She licked some ketchup off her finger and inhaled another fry.

“Six years ago,” Connor said. His face scrunched up uncertainly. “Seven?”

“Something like that,” Zoe nodded.

Connor turned to look at her.

She met his stare with one of her own.

“What made you think about it?”

“What?” Zoe blinked.

“Tonight. What made you think about it tonight?”

“I don’t know,” Zoe muttered.

“Random.”

“Yeah.” Her hand was empty when it emerged that time. She crumpled the bag up and threw it on the floor.

She rolled her eyes at Connor’s expression. “I’ll throw it in the trash when we get home.”

“The outside trash?”

“Yeah.”

“Or we could-”

“We’re not burning our bags!”

Connor threw his hands up in surrender.

“Mom wants to know where we are.”

Connor looked at her like she’d lost her mind. “So, tell her.”

“Tell her?”

“Tell her we went out to eat because she abandoned us.”

Zoe did just that.

Without the last part.

The response was instantaneous.

You’re with Connor?

Yes Zoe replied.

She put her phone down and ignored the texts she was sure were popping up.

“Did you finish your homework?” Connor asked.

“Yes, Mom,” Zoe chirped.

“Hey, it’s a fair question. I don’t feel like staying up until two doing your math homework.”

Zoe snorted at that. “Like I’d let you do my math homework.”

Connor flipped her off.

Zoe cackled and stole one of his fries.

He didn't smack her hand away.

It felt like a miracle.

"Dad's home."

Connor glanced at her quickly. "He texted you?"

Zoe nodded and typed out a response. *Before curfew.*

"What time's curfew during the week?"

Zoe hugged her phone to her chest to shield it from her brother. "Uh, hi. Personal space. Have you ever heard of it?"

"You were texting Dad."

"Yeah. So?"

"So, it's not like you were texting your boyfriend or--"

"I don't have a boyfriend!"

Connor raised his eyebrows at her tone.

She pushed her hair behind her ears. "You don't even know what time curfew is during the week?"

Connor shrugged.

"That explains so much."

"I have more important things to do than keep track of our parents' ridiculous rules and regulations."

"Like what?" Zoe demanded.

Connor flipped her off.

It wasn't as funny that time.

Zoe lowered her phone and chanced a glance in Connor's direction.

He was typing something on his phone.

Texting something? Texting someone?

She couldn't begin to imagine who.

She pretended to yawn and stretched so she could see.

He was playing a game.

Of course, he was.

He didn't look up.

She sent Nicole an ice cream emoji just because.

"We should go get ice cream."

Connor didn't put down his phone. "What?"

"Ice cream. There was that place near here, remember? We should go there."

"No," Connor snapped.

"What? Do you have something against ice cream now?"

"I'm not letting you take us on another wild goose chase through the countryside."

Zoe pretended to pout. It didn't take much effort. She really could go for a scoop of cookie dough.

"That look doesn't work on me. I'm immune."

Zoe rolled her eyes because she knew he was right. "Fine. I'm sure Mom's made another batch of zucchini cookies anyway."

Connor started the engine.

Zoe resisted the urge to clap her hands.

They made it just in time, ten minutes before the shop closed.

The employee tried his hardest to sell them apple cider.

They stuck to their guns and ordered ice cream, despite the fact that it was late and dark and there was a definite chill in the fall air.

They ate their cones outside. Zoe somehow managed not to shiver.

She checked the time. "Twenty minutes until curfew."

"We're thirty minutes away."

"Not the way you drive."

Connor gave her a look. "I'm not the one who keeps going through red lights."

"I don't keep going through red lights!"

"The cameras would disagree."

"That happened one time!"

"Two times."

Zoe's mouth twisted to the side. "The sun was in my eyes. I thought the light was green."

"Twice?"

Zoe stuck out her tongue. "Everyone knows those cameras are a scam. Nicole got a speeding one and she was barely even speeding."

Connor snorted. "I've seen the way Nicole drives."

Zoe made a face because he had a point.

"You should text Mom, tell her we're going to be late."

"Why do I have to text Mom? You have a phone. Use it."

Connor looked at her like the answer was obvious. "It'll sound better coming from you."

He had a point.

They knew their roles.

She sent the text.

Their mother responded with a thumbs up. Zoe could picture her smile.

She put her phone down. "So."

Connor raised an eyebrow at her before turning to squint at the moon.

Her mind went blank.

She couldn't remember what she was about to say, if she'd even had something to say. She licked her ice cream. "Are you going to the dance this weekend? Mom said you might."

Connor looked at her like she'd lost her mind.

Zoe nodded to herself. "That's what I thought."

"Are you?" Connor glanced at her quickly.

"Maybe," Zoe shrugged.

"No one's asked?"

"I don't need a date to go to a dance. If I go, it'll be with my girls."

"I bet Evan would take you."

Zoe snorted at that. "I'd have to do the asking."

"He'd say yes." Connor glanced at her again. "*Because there's Zoe...* Come on. That thing read like a love letter."

Zoe nibbled on her cone.

"You know I'm right."

"We're friends. Evan and I are friends."

"You're telling me he doesn't want more than that?"

"I don't know what he wants!"

It was Connor's turn to snort.

"Right," Zoe drawled. "Because you're such an expert on..." She bit her lip. Something about his expression made her pause.

Not out of fear. For once, it wasn't that.

He wasn't angry.

Hurt? Maybe. Not quite. He was something.

She wasn't sure what.

It didn't scare her though.

She popped the rest of her cone in her mouth and licked her fingers. "Who would you go with?"

It took him a second to process that. "To the dance?"

Zoe nodded. "If you could go with anyone you wanted, who-"

"Anyone in the world or anyone at our school?"

Zoe considered that for a moment. “School.”

Connor flicked her nose. “You. Obviously.”

Zoe rolled her eyes. “World then.”

“Do fictional characters count?”

“Sure,” Zoe sighed. “Why not?”

Connor tapped his chin. “I’ll get back to you on that.”

“It requires that much thought?”

Connor nodded solemnly.

Zoe rolled her eyes, but there was a smile on her face.

“That’s Ursa Major.”

“Is not.”

“Is so.”

Zoe narrowed her eyes. “Since when do you know the constellations?”

“I know things.”

“But the constellations-”

“It could be Ursa Major.”

Zoe snorted.

“Well, it could!”

“Do you remember the time Dad made us go camping?”

“Yeah...”

They snorted when their eyes met.

“Never again...”

They breathed the words together in an imitation of their mother.

“Jinx!” Zoe cried. “You owe me a-”

“Ride home?” Connor snapped.

Zoe nodded slightly.

She chanced a glance in his direction.

He was smiling.

“Do you know where you want to go next year?”

Connor gave her a look.

She threw her hands up. “This is me asking, not Mom.”

Connor shrugged.

“No idea?”

“A few. Nothing concrete.”

“Do you still want to study English?” She shook her head at his expression. “What? I’m curious. If I was asking for Mom, I’d... I don’t know. I’d ask which teachers you’d gotten recommendation letters from or...” She wrinkled her nose. “Which teachers are you getting recommendation letters from?”

“Ms. Ross said she’d write me one.” He gave her another look. “You don’t look surprised.”

“Makes sense,” Zoe nodded.

“Because I’m a fucking nutcase?”

“Because of all the faculty members at our school, she probably knows you the best.”

Connor crumpled up his napkin and threw it in the trash. “You ready?”

Zoe nodded.

“She must like you,” Zoe said softly. “Ms. Ross. She must think you’re-”

“Worth saving?”

“Worth...” Zoe blew her breath out in a huff. She stared out the window at the trees flying by. “She must think you have a future.”

“That makes one of us.”

“Two.” Zoe made a face. “Four.”

“Four? You’re counting Dad?”

Zoe nodded.

Connor took a sharp left.

They got home fifteen minutes after curfew.

Their parents were already in bed.

There was a light shining under their door.

They didn't come out.

Zoe decided to take that as a good sign.

She tried not to worry about what the future held.

The theme of the night was friends. Old friends, new friends, how to make and keep them.

Alana was up late for a school night.

Zoe made a mental note to bring her a triple espresso.

She thought about calling in. She could add a thing or two to the conversation.

She didn't though.

She felt like the Murphy family had been more than represented on *The Jazz Club with Alan Beck*.

She closed her laptop and stared at the ceiling.

The stars glowed in the dark.

She took a picture and sent it to Connor. *Which one's Ursa Major?*

He banged on the wall.

She banged back.

Jared

“What the fuck is that supposed to be?”

Jared flipped a page in his sketchbook and fought the urge to start over.

He didn't flinch or cringe or bristle at Connor's tone.

His drawing was crap, even he knew that.

His dreams of working for Marvel were long gone. In the comics division anyway. Maybe the movies. Maybe.

Special effects. That was where it was at.

He turned the page back. Ten minutes. He had ten minutes to draw something that looked like something. Anything. A basket of potatoes would do.

“Is that supposed to be a-”

“Shut up!” Jared grumbled. He closed his eyes and stabbed at the page. He hoped he was hitting the strawberries. “Don't you have something better to do, like, I don't know, your own picture, maybe?”

“I'm already done.” He held up a fruit bowl that was annoyingly perfect. “Your banana looks like a dick.”

“All bananas look like dicks.”

“Mine doesn't.” Connor waved his sketch again.

Jared rolled his eyes and glared at the bowl. “Good for you.” He flashed a grin in Connor's direction. “We're talking about your drawing, right? Not your...” Jared's hand flicked in the direction of Connor's pants.

And that right there was why Jared should not be allowed to interact with other people. Ever. Never ever. Not under any circumstances.

He snorted at the thought. Snorted and laughed and instantly regretted it when he remembered who he was talking to.

He chanced a glance in Connor's direction.

Connor looked amused.

That was a relief, even if the odds of Connor murdering him in the middle of art class were probably low. Probably. Almost definitely.

There were too many witnesses.

The parking lot would've been a minefield for him after school though.

It was good to see Connor had a sense of humor.

Still had a sense of humor.

Jared could remember a time in eighth grade when they'd cracked their class up with their social studies presentation. For a second there, he'd almost seen Connor as a friend. Friend-lite. An acquaintance. Someone he didn't mind being around.

And just like that, it was over. Gone. Never spoken of again.

He wondered if Connor remembered that week.

He wasn't about to ask.

Connor sat down on the stool next to him.

That was enough to make him bristle. He wondered what kind of body language he was displaying that made Connor take it as an invitation.

Connor pointed at the paper. "Your shading's off there."

Jared wrinkled his nose. "Everyone's a critic."

"I'm just saying..."

"Do you want something or is this a social call?"

Connor reached for the sketchbook. "Here. Let me."

Jared grabbed the book and hugged it to his chest.

Connor rolled his eyes. "I'm trying to help."

"How? By drawing dicks all over my fruit bowl?"

"You've already done that yourself!"

Jared snorted and put the book back.

Connor didn't move to take it again.

Jared attempted to fix his pear. "So... what can I do for you then?"

"I thought I told you to stay away from my sister."

Jared dropped his pencil. He took his time fetching it.

He forced himself to sit up.

Connor didn't look as menacing as he'd expected.

He took a breath. "Yeah, but did you tell her to stay away from me? Doesn't she get to pick her friends?"

"So, you're friends now?"

"Yeah," Jared shrugged. "I guess so."

"She's friends with you and Evan?"

Jared's eyes went wide. Something clicked in the back of his brain. He kept it to himself.

Somehow, he kept it to himself.

"Yeah," Jared drawled. "I mean, I'd say so, but you'd have to ask her for confirmation."

"You're not sure if you're friends?"

"Zoe's nice. She could just be nice to us because she's, you know, nice. A nice person. Really nice."

"She's not that nice."

Jared pointed at the pear. "That looks like a potato, doesn't it?"

"I think it looks like a boob."

"Your mind really is in the gutter."

"I call it like I see it."

Jared hummed at that. "As long as I get a B in this class, I'm good."

"He grades on effort, not quality."

Jared nodded slightly. "Then I should get an A."

Connor waved his hand in a so-so motion.

"I try!"

"Do you want me to-"

"No!"

Connor threw his hands up in surrender. "Why isn't Evan in this class?"

"He finished his art credits last year." Jared tilted his head. "Why?"

“Why what?”

“Why do you care that Evan isn’t in this class?”

“What makes you think I care?”

“Because you asked.”

“It was more of an observation than a question.”

Jared raised his eyebrows and focused on his drawing.

There was a definite boob-like quality to the pear. Once he saw it, he couldn’t unsee it.

He felt like shoving Connor off his stool.

He didn’t though.

He valued his life too much to try something like that.

“Evan and I only have like two classes together,” Jared pointed out. “It’s not like we’re attached at the hip or something.”

Connor didn’t say anything.

He didn’t say anything as loudly as someone could not say something.

Jared leaned back to study his drawing.

Crap.

There had never been a crappier bowl of fruit.

He wondered if he should let Connor help. How much worse could it get?

He shook his head and tried to fix the shading. “How many classes do you have with-”

“Four,” Connor said quickly.

Really quickly.

With a speed that surprised them both.

Jared made a face at his fruit. “That’s a lot.”

Connor didn’t say anything.

It was quieter somehow.

Jared drew a squiggle that could either be seen as an accident or a statement.

He wasn't sure which.

He didn't care which.

Good enough. He threw his pencil down and stretched.

The bell rang.

He turned to ask Connor something. He wasn't sure what.

It didn't matter.

Connor was already gone.

Jared yelped and jumped and spun around to see the source of his pain.

A guitar case to the shin.

That would do it.

He offered Zoe a sarcastic smile. "Somehow, I knew this day was going to end with a Murphy-inflicted injury. Silly me. I assumed it was going to come from your brother."

Zoe winced as she put her guitar down. "Sorry."

"Do you have a license to carry that thing?"

"I said I was sorry!"

"What do you have in there? A pile of bricks?"

"A stack of weights, actually."

"Is that why you're so fit?"

Zoe raised her eyebrows. "You think I'm fit?"

Jared scratched his neck. "You know you're..."

He glanced over his shoulder like that would get him out of this.

Zoe was chewing her lip when he turned around. "Did something happen?"

Jared didn't follow that at all.

Zoe sighed and pushed her hair back. "With Connor. Or do you expect every day to end in violence?"

Jared didn't know how to answer that.

Zoe stared at him like she was trying to read his mind. “Did he say something or...”

Jared shook his head. “It was nothing.”

Zoe closed her eyes. “What did he do?”

“He just...”

“What?”

There was a hint of something in Zoe’s tone. Several somethings.

She almost looked defeated.

Jared attempted to smile. “He made fun of my fruit bowl.”

Zoe’s mouth opened and closed. She shook her head. “I don’t want to know.”

“In art class! He made fun of my drawing!” He decided not to mention the banana-dicks.

He deserved a sticker for that. Such self-restraint. He didn’t know how he did it sometimes.

A smile tugged at Zoe’s mouth. “He teased you?”

“I don’t know if I’d call it teasing,” Jared mumbled.

Zoe’s smile didn’t fade. “That must mean he likes you.”

“Really? You think so? Maybe I should ask him to the dance!”

“Record it if you do. I could use the laugh.”

Jared nodded in the direction of the street. “Did Alana get you too?”

“For what?” Zoe blinked.

“Trash pickup.”

Zoe smiled into her hand. “You’re helping Alana pick up trash?”

“It’s Evan’s fault. He just had to go and tell her about Nature Club.”

Someone called Zoe’s name.

She held up a hand to say she was coming. “Band practice.”

“So, no trash then?”

“No trash,” Zoe confirmed. She picked up her guitar. “You should ask Connor if you see him. It’s not like he has anything better to do.”

He could hear her laughing all the way down the hall.

He didn't have to ask Connor because someone else already had.

Alana.

It had to be Alana.

That girl had powers Jared couldn't begin to comprehend.

He snorted and chuckled and let out a sound that was not flattering, to say the least.

He didn't care though.

The sight of Connor Murphy picking up trash deserved that and so much more.

He swallowed his laughter when Connor looked up. He was suddenly very aware of the stick Connor was using to stab the wrappers with.

He turned on his heel and went to find Alana.

Because he needed an assignment. Not because he was scared. He wasn't scared. There was no reason to be scared.

No reason at all.

The stick wasn't *that* pointy.

Alana was in her element. She was doling out orders and words of encouragement like they were going out of style.

And still, her bag held more trash than everyone else's combined.

She smiled when she spotted him. "You came."

Jared held out his hand expectantly

Her smile widened as she handed him a bag.

He squinted at it. "Where's my stick?"

"We're all out. You can get some gloves from Tracy."

Jared didn't hide his disgust.

"Connor got the last stick," Alana said in a tone that was equal parts happy and smug.

Jared couldn't blame her.

Getting Connor Murphy to pick up trash on the side of the road was quite an accomplishment if you weren't a judge.

Jared didn't say that out loud. Connor was too close for comfort. He commented on the number of volunteers instead.

Alana looked positively delighted to hear that. "I know, right? I can't believe how many people showed up."

Jared wondered how many of them were there just to rack up some community service credits.

He didn't say that out loud.

He let Alana savor her victory.

He was good like that.

Picking up trash wasn't as bad as he'd expected. He turned it into a game.

A game of observation.

It didn't take him long to get distracted.

He watched Sophie Ventura stab a bottle four times before she managed to scoop it up.

He watched a freshman slip on a banana peel and frantically look around to see if anyone had noticed.

He watched a pair of sophomores use their sticks like swords until Alana told them off.

He watched Alana and Tracy circle each other and smile and blink in a way that made him wonder what that was about.

He watched Evan hide. Not literally. He just kept his head down and worked like he was the only one doing it.

Jared smothered the twinge he felt when he saw that. The twinge of something. Not guilt. Not grief. Something. He didn't feel the need to work out what.

He watched Connor watch Evan.

Not openly.

Connor was too smart for that.

Jared noticed it though. He noticed the way Connor's eyes kept flickering in Evan's direction.

It took him awhile to notice Evan was looking back.

He saw the text after he threw his bag in the dumpster.

Evan needed a ride home.

Of course, he did. And, of course, he hadn't asked for one directly. His mother had asked Jared's mother who'd sent the request.

Jared rolled his eyes when he saw.

He waved his phone in Evan's direction. "You ready?"

Evan had the decency to look sheepish when he nodded.

The parking lot was emptying out slowly. Too slowly. Way too slowly for Jared's liking.

He had places to go and people to see and food to eat. It was practically dinnertime. Didn't people know that? Why did they insist on standing around chatting with each other when they could go home and eat?

His hand hovered above the horn but he couldn't bring himself to hit it. He didn't want to become the guy who gave a bunch of cheerleaders a heart attack.

He slammed on the brakes when one of them laughed her way in front of his car.

She had the nerve to look at him like he was in the wrong.

He narrowed his eyes.

She didn't notice.

Of course, she didn't.

She simply flounced back to her friends.

Jared clenched his teeth and looked around for his next obstacle.

He slammed on the brakes.

Evan jolted forward in surprise. "What?"

Jared grinned and threw a thumb to his left. "Do you think I should see if he needs a ride too?"

Evan didn't respond, didn't move at all.

"What was that? Was that a yes?"

“No,” Evan mumbled.

“No?”

Evan shook his head.

Jared opened his mouth. He closed his mouth.

He decided to be good.

And not just because he could see that Zoe was already waiting in the car.

“Do you want to come over for dinner?”

Jared blurted the question out when he pulled up to Evan’s house.

It caught them both by surprise.

Jared hadn’t meant to ask, hadn’t been instructed to ask, hadn’t even been thinking about anything but going home and eating his mom’s fried chicken.

It was just that Evan’s house was empty.

Empty and dark and the question had popped out uninvited.

Evan mumbled something about his homework.

And that was that.

At least Jared had tried.

Jared choked on his brother’s shirt and gave him a small shove.

It didn’t work.

He hadn’t actually thought it would.

He knew from experience that Henry wouldn’t let go until Henry was ready to let go.

It took a minute.

Jared wiped his mouth and smoothed his shirt and looked at his brother like he’d lost his mind.

Henry beamed at him. “I’m here for you, bro. You know that, right? I’m always here.”

Jared nodded dazedly.

He knew Henry, for all his faults, was there for him. He was a decent big brother as far as big brothers went.

He didn't know where this was coming from though. It was Henry, so there was a fifty percent chance it wasn't coming from anywhere at all.

He glanced at Henry's desk. His browser was open.

Alan's show.

Of course.

Alana and her brother had probably been going on about the importance of loving your siblings.

Jared looked around the room at the mess, the clutter, the light.

He thought about Evan sitting alone in a dark house.

His hand twitched toward his phone.

He didn't take it out.

Later.

Maybe.

He turned to face Henry.

His brother was sitting down, one earbud in, nodding along to whatever Alan was saying.

Jared sighed and clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm here too."

Cynthia

Cynthia looked in the mirror and did a quick twirl. “What about this one?”

She glanced over her shoulder and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Zoe?”

Zoe hummed in response. She didn’t look up.

That did it. Cynthia rolled her eyes. “Can you at least try to pay attention?”

“Try? No.” Zoe lowered her phone. “Pretend? Sure. Great dress, Mom!”

Two thumbs up and a cheesy smile.

Cynthia shook her head. “You were the one who wanted to go shopping.”

Zoe narrowed her eyes. “With Nicole. Not Nicole and our moms.”

Cynthia chose to ignore that jab. She nodded at Zoe’s phone. “Are they here?”

Zoe shook her head. “They’re not coming.”

Cynthia frowned at that. “But-”

“Nicole got into a thing with her mom and...”

“They’re not coming.”

Zoe nodded slowly. She hopped off the bench and stretched. “I’ll be in the music store. Text me when you’re ready to leave.”

Cynthia opened her mouth to argue, but what was the point?

She knew she’d butted in. She knew this wasn’t the day Zoe had planned.

She’d seen an opportunity and seized it.

Her mother would’ve done the same.

So would Zoe, someday when she had a daughter of her own.

She’d understand then.

Cynthia didn’t buy the dress.

She didn’t buy the khakis or the cardigan or the bikini she couldn’t even bring herself to try on.

She bought a pair of socks because it felt wrong to leave the store empty-handed.

She grabbed her phone to text Zoe, only to see her daughter had texted her first.

I ran into Jenny. We're going to go bug Maya at work.

Cynthia closed her eyes. So much for the mani-pedis she'd been imagining.

She could go by herself, of course. It wouldn't be the first time.

It was just that she'd wanted to go with Zoe. She couldn't blame her daughter though. It wasn't Zoe's fault she had failed to communicate her wants.

She would've done the same thing when she was sixteen. Friends before family when at the mall.

She decided to treat herself to a coffee. A fancy coffee. Flavored with whipped cream.

She deserved it. Once in a while, she deserved it.

She didn't leave right away.

She wandered around and window shopped for a bit.

She wasn't in a hurry to go home. Larry was holed up in his study and Connor was out with Jamie.

Her hand twitched towards her phone. Jamie had invited her to tag along. She could meet up with them wherever they were. She could crash their party and...

She was glad Connor had Jamie. It was good for him to have a relative he could stand. More than stand. One he chose to spend his Saturday with.

Jamie needed to hurry up and get married and start popping out babies.

Cynthia wanted a niece or nephew to steal.

She sipped her drink.

It was too sweet. Way too sweet.

It was kind of perfect.

She turned the corner and studied the display like she was actually thinking about buying a tent.

She smiled at the thought, the memory, the nightmare that had been.

Never again.

Once was enough.

She wondered if Larry wished he'd married Ellen Kent. Ellen Kent was outdoorsy. They would've had outdoorsy kids. They could've gone camping every weekend.

Or maybe not.

Kids were kids. They grew and developed in ways she couldn't predict, couldn't begin to understand.

She saw herself in her kids sometimes. She saw Larry in them too.

And then there were times she didn't know where they got it from. An obscure relative, maybe? Larry's great uncle. Her second cousin twice-removed.

No one at all.

They were their own unique people with their own unique lives.

She couldn't blame Zoe for going off with her friends, but that didn't make it any easier to accept.

She ducked into the bridal boutique on a whim.

She hadn't been in one in years, not since she'd been a bridesmaid in Kathy's wedding.

Kathy.

She hadn't seen her in forever.

She made a mental note to call her that week. Or send an email.

Or write on her Facebook wall.

That would do the trick. And it might get some of the other girls involved. Get a conversation going.

It would be nice to see them again.

Or at least stalk their profiles for a bit.

She tossed her cup in the trashcan that was conveniently located by the door and strolled inside like she belonged.

She wandered through the store alone. Painfully alone. She was the only one. Everyone else had a friend or a sister or someone to talk them out of the dress with the poofy skirt.

She turned to go.

She didn't belong there. She wouldn't belong there until Zoe got married.

Or Jamie.

She was willing to bet Zoe would go first.

She wondered what Zoe's wedding would be like. It would be a lowkey affair. She was sure of that.

Zoe wasn't like her. Zoe would be more concerned about the marriage than the wedding.

It was better that way.

Cynthia hoped it would be better that way.

She stepped in front of the dressing room right as someone came walking out.

It was a near collision.

She laughed.

They both laughed.

Her smile grew when she saw who it was. "Heidi!" She looked her up and down. "What are you doing here? I didn't know you were..."

Her voice trailed off when she saw Heidi's expression.

"Maggie," Heidi said quickly. "Maggie's getting married. I'm here for support."

She pointed at the woman studying her reflection.

Cynthia remembered her from Tom's party.

"Heids!" Maggie called. "A little help here!"

Heidi gave Cynthia an apologetic smile before going to see what the crisis was.

Cynthia turned to go.

And then she stopped.

Because she recognized the boy sitting in the corner.

She recognized the look on his face. It was the same one Connor got whenever she made him guard her purse.

It had been years since she'd seen that look. She couldn't remember the last time he'd let her drag him along on a shopping spree.

She wondered what Heidi Hansen had done right.

The boy – Evan, his name was Evan, she was almost certain – looked up at her with wide eyes.

“Evan?” She smiled. “It’s Evan, right?”

He nodded stiffly.

Her smile twitched with amusement. “I’m-”

“Zoe’s mom,” he blurted out. “I know. We met at your house and-and-”

“The college fair,” Cynthia nodded.

Evan’s eyes went wide again.

It was like he couldn’t believe she remembered him.

“Zoe’s around here somewhere,” Cynthia said. She bit her lip to keep from laughing at the way Evan looked around. “Well, not here, exactly. She’s visiting her friend Maya at work.”

“Oh,” Evan mumbled.

“She works at the pretzel stand.”

Evan nodded slightly.

“I can hold the purses if you want to-”

“No!”

Cynthia smothered her smile. Her phone buzzed.

Jamie wanted to know, on a scale from one to ten, how angry she’d be if Connor came home with a tattoo.

100!!! Cynthia typed.

The response was instantaneous. *That’s what I thought.*

Cynthia waited for more.

It didn’t come.

She closed her eyes and considered her options.

She could try tracking Connor’s phone.

Larry was the one who knew how to do that.

She could call him. He wouldn’t mind being interrupted for this.

She shook her head.

She didn't want to bring Larry into this. Not yet.

She could handle these things on her own.

She could call them. Connor first, then Jamie when that didn't work.

She could...

Her phone buzzed with a text from Connor.

Her hands shook as she opened it.

I failed my science quiz. You need to sign it by Monday.

Cynthia laughed with relief.

She texted Jamie. *No tattoo?*

No tattoo Jamie confirmed.

Cynthia shook her head.

Classic Jamie.

She remembered that move.

Open with something that would terrify a parent, follow up with the truth. It softened the blow.

For the record, I'm 18. I can get a tattoo if I want. Connor reminded her.

Cynthia shook her head again.

That was a conversation for another day.

The science problem was more pressing.

She tilted her head at Evan. "You don't happen to know any science tutors, do you?"

Evan's eyes went wide.

Cynthia was starting to think that was the norm for him.

"For Zoe or..." Evan cleared his throat.

"Connor," Cynthia nodded. "He needs help."

"Does he, uh, does he want help?"

“Probably not,” Cynthia admitted. “He needs it though.” She tilted her head. “Are you in his class?”

Evan nodded.

“How’d you do on the quiz this week?”

Evan scratched the back of his neck. “Pretty good.”

“He got 100,” Heidi said as she breezed over. “As usual.”

“Mom...” Evan muttered.

Heidi held out her hand. “Purse, please. We have a situation.”

Evan handed it over.

She ruffled his hair as she went by.

Cynthia studied him for a second. “When’s your next quiz?”

“We have a test om Friday.”

“What are you doing Thursday night?”

“Um.”

She could see the wheels turning in Evan’s head. “Would you like to study at our house?”

“With Connor?” Evan practically yelped. “I’m-I’m studying with Jared! At his house. I’m going to be at Jared’s house with Jared.”

“He can come too. We can make it a party. I’ll get snacks.” She leaned forward conspiratorially. “The good ones.”

She could make an exception this time. Salt, full fat, the works.

Evan bit his lip. “Um.”

“Zoe will be there too.”

Evan’s face went red. “I... I think Maggie’s stuck!”

He took off in the direction of the mirrors.

Cynthia couldn’t help but sigh.

Sometimes Cynthia wondered if she should’ve done more for Connor.

Which was ridiculous.

She'd done plenty.

She'd done too much, if you asked Larry.

Therapy, yoga retreats, expensive game consoles that he said would make him happy.

She'd tried her best.

Or had she?

Sometimes she wondered if she had.

She could've done more for him socially.

She had friends. Friends with sons, kids Connor's age. She could've done something with that.

She'd thought about doing something with that, had even tried a few times when Connor was younger.

It hadn't worked.

There had been a time when Connor had gotten along with the other kids. Gotten along well enough. They'd played together nicely when the situation required it.

And that was it.

He'd never asked to have either of the Harris boys over, never begged her to let him spend the night at their house, never expressed interest in hanging out with any of her other friends' kids.

It had only gotten worse as he got older.

She'd given up eventually.

Because it felt like she was beating a dead horse.

And she didn't want to be that mom. The one whose son dropped the f-word in every other sentence.

She had an image to protect.

"Hey, Ms. M! You want a pretzel? We have gluten-free ones now!"

Cynthia smiled at Maya's enthusiasm. "That would be nice. Thank you."

"For here or to go?"

“To go.” Cynthia turned to look at Zoe.

Zoe looked away.

Cynthia resisted the urge to sigh. She was interrupting. She knew she was interrupting. Her very existence was enough to embarrass her daughter.

But it was time to go.

“You ready?”

Zoe made herself look up. “You’re leaving?”

Cynthia nodded and accepted the pretzel from Maya. She fished around her purse for some money. “Time to start dinner.”

“Okay,” Zoe nodded.

She didn’t get up, didn’t make any moves to get up.

Cynthia gave her a look.

“Jenny invited me over for dinner.”

Jenny smiled to confirm that.

“It’s Family Night,” Cynthia reminded her.

“Sunday is Family Night.”

“Not this week. Your father’s going to the game with Fred tomorrow.”

Zoe’s mouth formed a thin line.

Cynthia knew that look. Zoe thought it was unfair that Family Night could be changed when her parents had plans but not when she did.

“Can Jenny come over?”

Jenny whipped around to look at Zoe.

Cynthia touched her forehead. “It’s-”

“Family Night,” Zoe finished with a roll of her eyes. She tapped her chin. “Except we’re going to the dance.”

“We are?” Jenny squeaked. Her eyes went wide. “I mean, we are!”

Cynthia didn’t buy that for a second. “I thought you’d decided not to go.”

“We changed our minds,” Zoe said tightly.

“You don’t have a dress.”

“I don’t need a dress.”

Cynthia raised her eyebrows.

“I’ll borrow one of Jenny’s.”

Jenny was at least four inches shorter than Zoe.

Cynthia didn’t point that out.

She knew how to pick her battles.

Family Night wasn’t worth it.

Family Night was a dream, an illusion, wishful thinking on her part.

It never happened the way she wanted it to. It rarely happened at all. Something always went wrong.

Larry had to work or Connor disappeared or they all simply forgot.

She couldn’t remember the last time they’d pulled it off successfully. She wondered if they ever had.

She gave her daughter a tight smile. “Okay. Have fun.”

She left before she could see the look of triumph crossing Zoe’s face.

The house was empty when she got home.

That wasn’t a total surprise. Zoe was at the mall. Connor was with Jamie. She’d expected Larry to be there, but it wasn’t shocking that he wasn’t.

She sat at the counter and ate her pretzel.

If she’d known that was going to be her dinner, she would’ve splurged and gotten a side of cheese sauce.

Larry came home first.

Cynthia looked up when he came in. “Where have you been?”

“Work,” he said.

She should’ve known.

She had known. She couldn't imagine the answer being anything else.

He made a bag of popcorn and camped out in the living room to watch the game.

She supposed that was his dinner.

Connor came home next.

Jamie wasn't with him.

Cynthia looked out the window to watch her sister drive away.

She asked Connor if he wanted her to heat something up for him to eat.

He went upstairs without saying a word.

Zoe came home right before curfew.

"How was the dance?" Cynthia asked.

"We didn't go."

Cynthia nodded and sipped her tea.

She'd assumed as much.

Cynthia stayed in the kitchen all night. It was her domain, her office, her safe space.

She meal prepped for the week and sorted through the mail and balanced the checkbook.

It was a productive evening.

A productive evening alone.

Larry came in first.

"Did we win?" she asked without looking up.

He hung his head in shame.

She patted his arm consolingly.

"Do we still have any leftover chicken?"

That got her attention. She put down the bill she'd been examining. "You're going to eat this late?"

"I haven't had dinner."

He said it like that was her fault.

Her spine felt stiff. Her jaw clenched and unclenched.

Larry breezed past her like everything was fine.

She let him get his chicken in peace.

She wrote the check without thinking, without remembering if she'd verified all of the charges.

Connor came in next.

She perked up at that. "Are you hungry?"

He went to the fridge without saying a word. He drank the milk straight from the carton.

"Gross!" Zoe sniffed as she joined her mother at the counter. "I'm hungry."

Connor put the carton back in the fridge.

Cynthia added milk to her shopping list and turned to face Zoe. "What do you want?"

Zoe shrugged and grabbed an apple from the bowl in front of her.

Problem solved.

Larry silently offered her a piece of chicken.

Zoe waved him off.

Connor snatched a piece before Larry could put the container back.

Cynthia smiled as she looked around the room.

It was Family Night after all.

"Why didn't you go to the dance?"

Zoe motioned at her mouth to say she was chewing.

Cynthia smiled patiently.

Zoe made a show of swallowing. "We didn't feel like it."

“No one asked you?” Connor smirked.

Zoe turned to glare.

“You should’ve asked Evan.”

Zoe made a show of biting her apple.

Connor almost laughed.

Almost.

He smiled.

It made Cynthia smile too. “Evan Hansen?”

Zoe choked on her food.

“I saw him at the mall today,” Cynthia said. She turned towards Connor. “Do you have your quiz?”

Connor simply stared.

“What quiz?” Larry demanded.

“The one I need to-”

“You failed another quiz?”

Connor pushed away from the counter.

Cynthia put out an arm to stop him. “It’s one quiz. I’m sure you’ll do better on the next one.”

Larry did not look convinced.

“Evan said there’s a test on Friday.” Cynthia sipped her tea. It was getting cold. “Have you ever thought about getting a group together to study after school?”

Connor looked at her like she’d lost her mind.

Cynthia knew when to pick her battles.

This was a conversation for another time, when they didn’t have an audience.

She pointed at Larry’s plate. “Are you done with that?”

He pushed it her way.

“Yeah, Connor,” Zoe grinned. “You can study with Evan and Jared and Alana, probably, while I’m at band practice. Good idea, Mom!”

If looks could kill, Zoe would've been a pile of ash.

Her grin grew as she tossed the apple core in the trash.

It sailed right in.

She pumped her fist triumphantly.

Larry gave her a high five.

Cynthia felt warm all over.

They went upstairs together. All four of them.

Cynthia couldn't remember the last time they'd done that.

She wrapped an arm around Zoe. "Did you have a good night at least?"

"We watched *Glee*."

Cynthia wasn't sure if that was a yes or a no. She smiled anyway.

"Dances aren't really my thing," Zoe admitted.

"But you love to dance!"

"Yeah, but..." Zoe shrugged.

"No one asked you?"

"I didn't need someone to ask me! I just..."

"Not your thing?"

"Not my thing." She elbowed her brother. "Not Connor's thing either."

"Or mine," Larry chimed in.

They looked at Cynthia expectantly.

"I don't know what you all are talking about. I loved dances!"

"Guess they got it from me then," Larry grinned.

Cynthia looked at the three of them.

Her family, her life, her world.

"I guess they did."

Heidi

“Am I making a mistake?”

“Yes.”

“Heids!”

Heidi shrugged and smirked at her reflection. “You wanted an honest answer.”

“Yeah, but...” Maggie let her breath out in a huff. “I’m 45.”

Heidi nodded. They were both 45.

“If I don’t do it now, when?”

“That’s a great reason to get married.” Heidi gave her two thumbs up.

Maggie pouted at the mirror.

Heidi closed her eyes and turned around to face her. “Do you love him?”

Maggie’s face went blank.

“Do you want to spend the rest of your life with him?”

“Like you’re spending the rest of your life with Dan?” Maggie snapped.

Heidi spun around to fix her lipstick. “Harsh, Mags.”

“Honest, Heids.” Maggie leaned forward to smooth her hair. “Do you regret it?”

“Regret what?”

“Marrying Dan.”

Heidi pulled back to study her reflection. Her heart did a flip.

She’d known what Maggie was getting at. Of course, she had.

She didn’t know the answer.

“No.”

Or maybe she did.

Maggie tilted her head. “Because it gave you Evan?”

Heidi glanced over her shoulder. She smiled in the direction where her son was sitting.
“Yeah.”

Maggie exhaled sharply. “I can’t even have that.”

Heidi didn’t catch her eye.

They’d talked about it when they were younger. Getting married, having kids. Kids who would be best friends, naturally.

There wasn’t a chance of that happening now.

Even if Maggie had an offspring somehow, they’d never be Evan’s best friend.

Evan would be an uncle figure in the kid’s life. A dorky older cousin. A babysitter.

“Does Tommy want kids?”

Maggie shrugged.

Heidi’s mouth twitched. “Isn’t that something you should discuss before-”

“We have time!”

Six months. They weren’t getting married for six months.

This was just the engagement party. An engagement party. A dinner, really.

There would be a bigger, more formal celebration later.

Maggie had time.

Heidi doubted she’d use it.

“We can always adopt.” Maggie snapped her fingers. “Or use a surrogate!”

“Yeah,” Heidi nodded.

“There’s still time.” She reached into her purse and waved a tampon at Heidi. “The well hasn’t dried up yet!”

Heidi jumped when Maggie nudged her.

“There’s still time for both of us. Are you sure you don’t want to try to make it work with Todd?”

Heidi gave her a look.

“Our kids would be cousins!”

Heidi shook her head. “Not a chance.”

Maggie smiled slightly. "It was just a thought."

"You should get back."

"We should get back."

Heidi wasn't ready to go back.

She needed to though. If she left Evan alone any longer, he'd melt.

Evan wasn't melting.

He was talking.

Heidi rubbed her eyes and looked again to be sure.

Her son was talking and not to Maggie, the only other person he knew.

She studied his face for signs of fear, of panic, of the need to flee.

There were none.

She couldn't believe her eyes.

She went to the bar to get another drink because she didn't want to interrupt that, whatever it was.

Her son was talking.

"Chardonnay, please," she told the bartender. She turned around to survey the room.

The restaurant was crowded. Their group took up three of the tables. A small group, Maggie had said.

She couldn't believe what Maggie's life was becoming.

Maggie the trophy wife, the corporate bride, the arm candy.

It was enough to make Heidi's head spin.

"Whiskey, neat."

Heidi raised her eyebrows at Cynthia's order.

Cynthia smiled knowingly. "It's for Larry." She accepted the drink. "Sparkling water, please. I'm driving."

Heidi sipped her wine and wondered if she could talk Evan into driving them home. She knew better than to let herself get to the point where that would be necessary.

Cynthia stepped a bit closer.

Heidi followed her gaze to the table on the left, the one where Evan was sitting.

“I’ll rescue him in a minute,” Cynthia promised.

Heidi blinked at that.

“I’ll pull Larry away before he talks Evan’s ear off.”

Larry. Cynthia’s husband.

Of course.

Heidi hadn’t placed the face right away.

“He can’t help getting excited when someone mentions his alma mater.”

“His... what?”

“It’s my fault,” Cynthia sighed. “I asked Evan what schools he’s applying to and-”

“He mentioned Larry’s alma mater?”

Cynthia nodded tightly.

“Evan doesn’t look like he minds.”

“I’m sure he’s just being polite.”

Heidi sipped her drink.

She knew what her son looked like when he was being polite.

That wasn’t it.

She tried to look on the bright side.

At least he was talking to someone about his applications.

At least he was talking to someone, period.

She sipped her drink.

“Maybe I should get Larry to ask him.”

“Ask him what?”

Cynthia blinked like she hadn’t realized she’d spoken, like she’d been thinking out loud.

“Nothing. It’s just... Connor’s failing science.” Cynthia shook her head. “Not failing. Failed. One quiz. He failed one quiz. That doesn’t mean he’s failing, does it?”

Heidi didn't know how to answer that.

That was one thing she'd never had to worry about with Evan.

Cynthia cleared her throat. "I asked Evan... When I saw you at the mall yesterday, I asked Evan if he'd like to study at our house this week."

"With Connor?"

Cynthia nodded. "For the test on Friday."

Heidi hadn't known they had a test.

She nodded like she had. "What did he say?"

Cynthia smiled sheepishly. "He said he's studying with his friend Jared."

She tilted her head like she was trying to tell if that was true.

Heidi smiled like it was. "Evan and Jared study together a lot."

"Oh," Cynthia nodded. She downed the rest of her water and asked for a Merlot. "That's nice. That's good that he has someone to..."

Her voice trailed off.

Heidi knew that tone, that look, that everything.

It was strange to be on the other side, to be the mom whose son was normal. Almost normal.

Accepted. Not alone.

"I'm sure they wouldn't mind if Connor joined them," Heidi said brightly.

Cynthia sipped her wine. "That would be nice."

Heidi glanced at her son.

He was deep in conversation with Larry.

Something twisted in her gut.

"They're welcome to study at our house," Cynthia offered. "Or yours. Or Jared's. Anywhere, really."

She said it brightly, lightly, like this was a casual thing.

Heidi knew that tone. She knew it well.

She sipped her drink. "I'll tell Evan to..."

Her voice trailed off when her mind caught up.

She couldn't leave this up to Evan. He'd never sort it out.

Cynthia's mouth twitched like she agreed. "Tell him to come to our house Thursday at four. I'll get snacks."

Heidi glanced at her son.

She wondered if she should consult with him before agreeing.

She didn't need to consult with him.

She knew what he'd say.

She sipped her drink. "I'll let him know."

Heidi closed her eyes and tried not to let her frustration show. "That's it. Just tap the gas a bit more and ease--"

"You're not helping!"

Heidi kept her eyes closed. She didn't want to see what Evan was doing.

She needed to see what he was doing.

If they were going to make it home alive, she needed to keep her eyes open. "Okay, okay. You've got this."

Evan's eyes bulged at that. His fingers gripped the steering wheel so tightly it was a wonder they didn't break.

Heidi gave him her brightest smile. "We're almost there. You just have to--"

"Stop! I-I can't think while you're..."

Heidi pretended to zip her lips.

She dug through her purse for an imaginary object.

Her son was a licensed driver. He was perfectly capable of-

She put a hand out to catch herself when he slammed on the brakes.

"Evan!"

The car behind them honked. So did the one behind that.

Heidi swatted Evan's arm. "You have to keep--"

“I can’t do this! Why are you making me do this?”

Heidi summoned every bit of patience she had and breathed. “Why did you stop?”

“I...”

“You can’t just stop in the middle of the highway!”

Heidi closed her eyes.

That had come out shriller than she would’ve liked. Shriller and angrier.

She couldn’t bring herself to look at her son.

She leaned over to put their hazards on.

And took a breath.

In and out.

“We have two exits to go.”

Evan shook his head.

“You have to learn how to do this. Practice makes perfect.”

“I don’t, actually,” Evan insisted. “I don’t have to-”

“I won’t be able to drive you around forever!”

“Yeah, but there are buses and-and Ubers and-”

“Evan!” Heidi shook her head at him. “I thought you were working on this, embracing the fear, trying new things, being...”

Being what?

She wasn’t sure. She...

Normal. She wanted him to be normal, to be able to function normally.

She was glad she’d stopped herself in time.

Or maybe not.

His face suggested otherwise.

She sighed and rubbed her eyes. “Pull over on the shoulder.”

Evan whipped around to look at her. “What?”

“Let’s switch then. If you can’t do this, we’ll switch places.” She smiled tightly. “You can always take the back roads.”

“The back roads aren’t so bad.”

He eased forward slowly, carefully, with eyes that kept looking every which way.

He wasn’t a bad driver.

He just needed more confidence.

He made it to the shoulder without hyperventilating.

Heidi decided to count that as progress.

Heidi smothered a yawn and drummed her fingers on the table. She needed to wake up. Not a lot, just a little. Enough to finish the chapter she was reading.

And that was it.

Then she could go to bed and wake up in six hours for her sixteen hour shift.

She could do this.

She had done this a thousand times.

She smothered the urge to make coffee.

Those six hours of sleep were necessary for her survival, for her patients’ survival, if she wanted to keep her job.

The floorboards creaked.

She looked up in time to see Evan stumble in.

He froze when he saw her. He rubbed his eyes and yawned and frowned in a way that made her stomach twist.

She ignored it. She made herself perk up. “Hey, sweetie. Can’t sleep?”

“Water,” he managed to croak.

He made a beeline for the sink.

She squinted at her laptop and tried to focus.

She sighed and put it away.

She'd finish the chapter during her break. If she got a break. If she got a break during a time when her mind was sharp.

"I have a test on Wednesday," Heidi said.

"Oh," Evan muttered.

"It's too bad it's not on Friday. We could pull an all-nighter Thursday. Maggie and I used to do that, you know. We'd have study parties and stay up all night painting our nails and talking about boys and... you know, I sometimes wonder how I managed to graduate from high school."

Evan downed his water and put the cup in the sink.

He turned to go.

"I heard you're studying for the test with Jared. That sounds fun."

Evan froze in the doorway. His spine went stiff. "You... How... Who..."

"Cynthia said you're studying with Jared."

Evan's eyes darted to the side when he turned around. "Yeah, uh..."

"She said her son's in your class?"

Evan nodded weakly.

"Why don't the three of you study together?"

"What? No. That... That, uh..."

"Cynthia asked if you could come to her house. I said yes."

Evan's eyes darted around wildly.

"Thursday at four," Heidi said with a nod.

"What-wait-what?" Evan sputtered. He rubbed his eyes and rocked back on his heels.

"I told her you'd be there Thursday at four. You and Jared."

She'd thought that last part would bring him some comfort.

The look on his face told her she was wrong.

"No."

"Evan."

"No-no-no-no-no. That... No."

“Why not?”

Evan let out a barking laugh. “Why not?”

“Three heads are better than two and Cynthia said her son could use some help. You’re good at science, so I thought-”

“No.”

Heidi closed her eyes. “Fine.”

“Fine?”

“Don’t go,” Heidi shrugged. “It’s your life.”

Evan looked at her like he was trying to get the catch.

“It’s just...” Heidi exhaled deeply. “The way I see it, this is an opportunity.”

“An opportunity to what?”

“An opportunity to make a friend.”

Evan’s eyes bulged at that. “Connor Murphy doesn’t have any friends. He doesn’t want any friends. He-”

Heidi pointed at his arm. “I’ve been meaning to ask.”

Evan threw his arm behind his back.

Heidi smiled into her hand. “Who signed your cast?”

Evan’s mouth opened and closed several times.

Heidi could see the wheels turning in his head. She continued on before they could churn out a lie. “It says Connor.”

Evan swung his arm back around. He blinked at it like it was something new.

“I was thinking it was, I don’t know, the name of a band or something.”

The look of relief that crossed Evan’s face made her mouth twitch.

She continued on before he could tell her all about Connor’s greatest hits. “It isn’t a band though, is it? Was it Connor Murphy? Did he sign your cast?”

Evan shifted from foot to foot.

His mouth opened and closed.

He mumbled something about needing sleep before taking off towards the stairs.

Heidi sighed and let him go.

Morning came too soon, but then what else was new?

Heidi got up the second her alarm went off. She didn't have time to lie around.

She tiptoed down the stairs and started the coffee and scrolled through her phone while it brewed.

She made the mistake of checking Facebook.

She wasn't the only one who'd had an eventful weekend.

She scrolled past the pictures from Maggie's dinner – pausing briefly to blink at one of Evan and Larry – until she landed on Dan's latest post.

And once again she was forced to wonder why she was Facebook friends with her ex.

Because of Evan. Everything was because of Evan.

Dan's kids were adorable. His real kids. The cynical part of her brain always called them that.

His real kids, his real life.

His real wife.

Lisa had cut her hair. It was a good look for her.

Heidi folded her hair around her chin and glanced at her reflection in the window.

It was not a good look for her.

She let her hair go and went to get her coffee.

Ten minutes. She had ten minutes to become functional.

She put her phone in her purse. This was not the time to obsess about Dan's family.

His picture perfect family.

She wondered if they were as perfect as they seemed.

She wondered if it was too late for her.

Maybe Maggie was right. Maybe she should give Todd another chance.

She choked on her coffee. Even in her exhausted state, she knew not to do that.

She'd rather be alone than settle for someone she could barely stand.

And she wasn't alone. Not really.

She had Evan.

Thank God she had Evan.

She didn't need a do-over family. She had a perfectly good one already.

She sent Maggie a text. *No regrets here.*

The response was instantaneous.

That haircut makes her look like Edna Mode.

Heidi couldn't help but snort.

That was what friends were for.

Larry

“We lost,” Larry announced to the room. He put his mug down and waited for the reaction.

There was none.

He hadn’t really expected there to be.

Zoe was studying for a quiz.

Connor was Connor.

Only Cynthia seemed to realize he’d spoken. She tilted her head. “What?”

Larry rustled the newspaper. “The game. We lost.”

Cynthia closed her eyes knowingly. “And you think that’s your fault? You think they would’ve won if you’d gone?”

Larry shrugged and turned the page.

“You were the one who said we should go to Tom’s dinner, not me.”

“Fred was the one who decided we should go,” Larry reminded her.

“You could’ve bought the tickets from him,” Cynthia pointed out. “You could’ve taken one of the kids.”

Zoe looked up at that. “Taken us to what?”

“The football game,” Cynthia said.

Zoe wrinkled her nose. “Pass.”

“It already happened,” Larry told her.

Zoe hummed happily and flipped to her next index card.

“Maybe next time then,” Cynthia chirped. “If Fred can’t make it.”

Larry looked at his kids. The thought of taking either of them to the game was even more ludicrous than the thought of taking Cynthia.

At least Cynthia knew how to stay silent and let him have his fun.

“Maybe I’ll take you,” Larry wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“Aww, Mom,” Zoe cooed. “I think he likes you.” She checked the time and nudged her brother. “You ready?”

Connor stood up without saying a word.

Larry watched them go. "How long did we take his keys for this time?"

"We didn't," Cynthia said.

Larry shook his head. That couldn't be right. "Two weeks? Three?"

"He isn't being punished."

Larry bristled at how exasperated she sounded. "He's always being punished."

"Not always!"

Larry focused on the newspaper.

Tried to focus on the newspaper.

It was hard to focus while Cynthia was staring at him like that.

"What do you think we're punishing him for?" Cynthia demanded.

Larry put the paper down. "I..."

He had nothing.

He knew it. She knew it. If the kids had been there, they'd know it too.

He decided to change the subject. "Then why is he still riding with Zoe?"

Cynthia frowned like that hadn't occurred to her. "To save gas?"

"We pay for his gas."

"To save the environment? Zoe thinks he might be joining the school's nature club."

"Really?" Larry chuckled.

"Well." Cynthia bit her lip. "Maybe. Zoe said it like it was a joke, but I keep telling him he should try something new and-"

"You think he listened?"

Cynthia closed her eyes. "He listens. Sometimes."

Larry hummed at that.

Connor did listen. Sometimes.

Even he knew that.

He downed the rest of the coffee and stood to go.

Cynthia put a hand out to stop him. She sighed at her phone. “Zoe forgot her guitar.”

Larry tilted his head.

“Can you drop it off? The girls will be here at nine. It’s my turn to host.”

Larry’s jaw twitched. He didn’t have to be in court until the afternoon, but the morning was packed with meetings and phone calls and a solid hour of research.

He could swing by the school though. It was on his way if he took Elm.

“Where is it?”

Cynthia checked her phone. “In her room.”

Larry nodded and went to check.

“Will you be home for dinner?” Cynthia called after him.

Larry pretended not to hear. He didn’t know the answer and he didn’t want to commit to something that only had a 50% chance of happening.

The guitar was next to Zoe’s bed.

Larry spotted it immediately. He scooped it up and headed back out as quickly as he’d come.

He paused for a moment to look over his shoulder.

His eyes darted around the room.

For what?

He wasn’t sure.

He’d never searched Zoe’s room.

There had never been a need.

He didn’t think there was one now.

He closed the door.

The school was bigger than he remembered. Bigger and louder and more crowded than he’d ever seen it before. Which made sense since he’d only been there for an occasional meeting or concert.

Apparently, there weren't a lot of jazz fans in their town.

It took him nearly five minutes just to get through the door and then he was directed towards the front office.

It occurred to him that he should've thought this out, should've told Zoe to meet him in the parking lot. This wasn't like when the kids were in elementary school. He couldn't just pop into their classroom with the forgotten item.

He signed in at the desk and explained the situation. The receptionist said Zoe could get the guitar from her later.

And that was it.

He was done.

He turned to go.

He didn't make it far.

"Mr. Murphy?"

He glanced over his shoulder at... a teacher? She had to be a teacher. Or an administrator of some kind.

She looked familiar.

He felt like he should be able to place her face.

She stuck out her hand. "Gwendolyn Ross. We met last year."

He nodded slowly. The guidance counselor.

They had met at the one meeting Cynthia had managed to drag him to.

One out of ten. He didn't need Cynthia to tell him his track record was bad.

It was a good thing the school didn't grade parents on their participation.

He shook her hand. "Larry Murphy."

She smiled like she already knew that. "This is good timing. I just emailed your wife back."

Larry wondered if that was something he should've known.

She nodded towards her left. "Do you have a minute? I'd love to get you up to speed."

Larry resisted the urge to check the time.

He had time. Technically, he had time. The conference call wasn't until ten and even that was negotiable. Those things never started on time.

And it wasn't like they could start without him.

He followed her down the hall.

Her office was small, cramped, and bright. There were motivational posters featuring butterflies on every wall. The edge of her desk featured an assortment of stress balls.

He squeezed one as he sat down.

He wondered how many times Connor had been in this spot. He wondered if the butterflies looked like they were moving to him too.

He made a mental note to ask.

That was something they could laugh about later if Connor was in the mood to laugh.

If he wasn't, he'd see it as an attack, a suggestion that he was a freak who practically lived in the guidance counselor's office.

Larry made a mental note to read the room first.

Ms. Ross closed her laptop and looked him in the eye. "I've compiled three lists." She handed him a piece of paper. "The first one is a list of schools I think Connor can get into, the second is a list of schools with strong English programs, the third is a list of schools that fall into both of those categories."

Larry did a double take when he saw how long the first column was. "Cynthia asked you to do this?"

Ms. Ross shook her head. "She expressed her concerns and I wanted her to see--"

"They're not necessary."

"She's a mom. I get that. I know Connor's had..." Ms. Ross's mouth twisted to the side. "He's had his share of issues, but he's bright. He's a good student when he tries. His English teachers have always raved about his essays."

Larry nodded slightly.

That was true.

He knew that much was true.

"He told me he wants to major in English. I thought this list might help."

Larry stared at the list. "He told you that?"

Ms. Ross smiled brightly. "He did."

Larry folded the list neatly and put it in his pocket. "Thank you."

Ms. Ross's smile grew wider. "You're welcome."

Larry checked his phone while he waited for Ms. Ross to come back with a booklet of some kind. Ten texts from Grayson and a missed call.

That wasn't good.

That could wait.

Grayson would've left a voicemail if there was a real emergency. Larry told himself that.

His fingers hovered over the text chain with Cynthia. He wanted to say something, but he wasn't sure what.

That he was relieved?

That he was glad Connor was doing something?

Something positive.

He was taking initiative and planning for his future.

That was all Larry had ever wanted.

On the most basic level, that was all he had ever wanted.

Would he like his kids to be successful in the traditional sense? To become a doctor or a lawyer? To become something he could brag about at cocktail parties?

Sure. Of course. That would be nice.

But this was good too. It was better than he'd expected.

He didn't know what Connor was planning to do with an English degree.

He made a mental note to ask.

The school had quieted down by the time Larry left the guidance office.

The hallway was empty except for one person.

Larry smiled when he saw him. He leaned over conspiratorially. "So, what're you in for?"

Evan jumped so hard he nearly fell off his chair. "Wh-what? I. Um."

Larry shook his head and chuckled. "Sorry. Gallows humor. It comes with the territory when you're a lawyer."

Evan nodded weakly. His eyes darted towards the room Larry had just walked out of. “Is Ms. Ross in? We have an appointment and-and I...”

“We just finished up. I’m sure she’ll be with you in a minute.”

Evan nodded again. He gripped his backpack so tightly his knuckles turned white.

Larry looked between him and the door. His phone buzzed.

Grayson.

He didn’t have to look to know that.

He ignored the text and focused on Evan. “Are you here about your college applications?”

Evan nodded in a way that made Larry think that wasn’t really the case.

Larry wondered what that meant. He wondered what Evan needed to see Ms. Ross about.

Evan didn’t seem like the type to skip classes or curse at his teachers. There weren’t any questionable odors coming from his jacket.

He wasn’t Connor.

Larry cleared his throat. “So, Cynthia tells me you’re coming to our house this week.”

Evan’s head popped up at that. “Oh. Um. Yeah, uh... Maybe. I, uh, I don’t... I’m not sure, uh-”

“To study,” Larry went on like Evan wasn’t stammering his way through a denial. “For a quiz, was it?”

“A test,” Evan corrected automatically. “A, uh... It’s for science class.”

Larry nodded solemnly. “Connor’s worst subject.” He wrinkled his nose. “Second worst after math.”

Evan stared at his shoes.

“He needs all the help he can get.”

Evan’s head popped up again. “I’m not sure if I-”

“What kind of pizza do you like?”

Evan’s eyes went wide. “Uh.”

“Cynthia said we can order pizza.” Larry rubbed his hands together. “I can’t tell you how excited I am. It’s not every day we get brand-name pizza in the Murphy house. It’s usually some unholy concoction made of cauliflower and soy.”

Evan cringed in sympathy. “Cheese is fine. Or, uh, anything, really. I’m not picky.”

“Neither is Connor. Zoe on the other hand...” Larry smiled slightly. “Hey, remind me to show you that book.”

“What book?” Evan frowned.

“The one we were talking about the other day. The one Peter wrote about-”

“Evan!” Ms. Ross called. She smiled and motioned for him to come in.

Evan stood to go.

“I’ll show you on Wednesday.”

“Thursday,” Evan corrected automatically.

His eyes went wide when he heard himself.

Larry beamed at that. “Thursday. I’ll see you then.”

Evan lowered his head and scurried towards the guidance office.

The door clicked shut behind him.

Larry couldn’t help smiling and feeling a bit like Cynthia.

The day was long and fast and a bit of a blur.

He ate dinner at his desk and ignored the texts from Cynthia.

He ignored the ones asking what time he was leaving.

He answered the one asking him to pick up some milk on his way home.

His phone went silent after that.

That was not a good sign.

He shrugged it off. That was a problem for Future Larry.

Present Larry needed to focus.

He went back to work.

It was late when he left. Later than usual. His usual evening commute shows were over.

He flipped around until he found a station he could tolerate.

Not tolerate.

He couldn't tolerate the sounds that were coming out of his speakers.

He was curious though. A part of him felt like it would be in his best interest to know exactly what they were talking about on *The Jazz Club with Alan Beck*.

"And that right there was another great one by-"

"You call that great?" The girl host blew a raspberry into her microphone. "That was crap and you know it."

"Hey! What's crap is your taste in music!"

"Really?" The girl chuckled. "Let's take a poll then. Come on, dear listeners, give us some feedback. How many of you think my brother has the worst taste in-"

"Lanie! Need I remind you this is my show?"

The girl chuckled again.

The boy sighed into his mic. "Okay, caller, you're on with-"

"The Bickering Becks," the girl finished with a giggle.

The boy shushed her.

"Hey," the caller started. "I was just going to say I can send you some suggestions if you ever want to play some real jazz music."

Larry pulled back to stare at the radio dial.

Zoe?

No.

Maybe.

He didn't know why he was surprised.

"You're saying the songs we play here at *The Jazz Club with Alan Beck* aren't real jazz?"

"No. I mean, yeah. I mean." The caller – Zoe, it had to be Zoe – chuckled awkwardly. "It depends on your definition of the word jazz."

"So, you agree they're crap then?" the girl host asked.

"I don't know if I'd say that. Music is subjective. Everyone has the right to like what they like."

“That’s not what you said in the car this afternoon.”

A fourth voice. Larry jumped when he heard it.

“Connor!” The caller – Zoe, it was definitely Zoe – yelped. “What-”

“Hey, you’re the one who decided to use the landline to call into a radio show like we’re living in a teen movie from the ‘90s!”

“My phone’s dead,” Zoe huffed.

“Where’s your charger?”

“In my room.”

“And you are?”

“In the living room.”

“Sucks to be you.”

“Okaaay,” the girl host drawled. “This is officially turning into Sibling Hour at *The Jazz Club with Alan Beck*. Zoe, is that you?”

“And Connor on the upstairs phone.”

“I didn’t realize you were both into jazz.”

Larry chuckled at the girl’s tone.

“He’s not,” Zoe said. “He just likes weird stuff.”

“I thought people were allowed to like what they like,” Connor reminded her.

“Did I say they can’t?”

“In the car this afternoon. You said-”

“Oh my God! How many times do I have to say this? Driver controls the music! That was your rule, remember? Excuse me for following it.”

“That’s it. I’m driving tomorrow.”

“Fine by me.”

There was a pause.

“Do you want a ride?”

“You’re still scared to be alone?”

Another pause.

“I mean....” Zoe breathed into the phone. “Yeah, sure. But I swear if you put on any of that weird techno crap, I’m-”

There was a click, followed by a second one.

The line went dead.

The host came back.

“Aaaand now for a sweet, sweet number by Lil Patty!”

Larry resisted the urge to cover his ears.

He wondered what Zoe would say if he encouraged her to send that list.

The downstairs lights were off when Larry got home.

That was not a good sign.

Cynthia was annoyed.

At least she’d left the porch light on.

He stumbled his way in and went straight to their room.

Cynthia wasn’t the only one in it. He blinked when he saw that.

The kids were sprawled across their bed looking at something.

Larry inched closer to see what.

Zoe noticed him first. She snorted when she looked up. “You used to have a moustache?”

Larry looked to Cynthia for an explanation.

“They wanted to see our old wedding pictures,” Cynthia said.

Larry nodded slowly.

By they Cynthia meant she, as in Zoe. Larry couldn’t imagine a scenario in which Connor had asked to see his parents’ wedding album.

“And your hair!” Zoe giggled. “It’s so-”

“Long,” Connor finished.

Larry rubbed the back of his neck. “I wouldn’t call that long.”

Longer. It was longer than they'd ever seen it.

It had been a look.

"And Mom!" Zoe laughed so hard she wheezed. "Your dress!" A look of horror flashed across her face. "You didn't save it for me, did you?"

Cynthia sipped her tea. "Fashion is cyclical. What goes around, comes around. That look might be in style again by the time you're ready to get married."

"The sleeves," Zoe wheezed. "I can't. I..."

Larry threw his tie on the chair next to the others. "What brought this on?"

"Zoe's teacher-" Cynthia started.

"Ms. Hogan's getting divorced," Zoe finished. "She spent all of fifth period complaining about how weddings are pointless parties that end in tragedy."

Zoe used air quotes to emphasize her point.

Connor snorted at that. "Last year, she wouldn't shut up about her wedding. She made us conjugate-"

"What does she teach?" Larry demanded.

"I have her for her study hall," Zoe said. "Connor had her for Spanish."

Larry raised his eyebrows at Cynthia.

That explained some things, like the fact that Connor couldn't even count to ten in Spanish.

Cynthia smiled like she knew what he was thinking. "I've already voiced my concerns."

Zoe flipped to the next page and snorted at a picture of Jamie wearing a puffy dress. "I told Mom I'm not sure if it's worth it."

Connor looked at her strangely. "Spanish?"

Zoe shook her head. "Marriage."

"Oh," Connor nodded. "It's not."

"And you know that because?"

Connor gestured at his parents. "What's that on Jamie's head? It looks like a dead bird."

Larry looked at Cynthia. She was biting her lip and hugging herself in a way that made his stomach twist.

"I like it," Zoe decided. "It would make a good Halloween costume."

Connor hummed at that.

“There’s more to being married than the wedding,” Cynthia said. She looked to Larry for support.

He gave it with a nod.

She looked away.

He swallowed sharply. He needed to do more than that. “The wedding is just a party.”

Cynthia narrowed her eyes.

“The marriage is for life.”

“Unless you’re Ms. Hogan,” Zoe chirped.

Cynthia pointed at the album. “Oh, there’s Lucy. I haven’t seen her in ages.”

“Didn’t she move to Michigan?” Larry asked.

“No, that was Lacy.”

Larry rocked back on his heels. It was getting late. He wondered if Cynthia knew how late it was getting. He wondered when she’d suggest that the kids go to bed.

“See, that’s what Ms. Hogan was saying,” Zoe said. “Weddings are just pointless parties for people you don’t even know.”

“I know every person in there!” Cynthia gestured at the album.

“But how many of them do you still see?”

She had her there.

Larry smiled at that.

Moments like that made him think Zoe really could be a lawyer if she wanted.

“Okay,” Cynthia relented. “The wedding may be a party, but the marriage...”

She looked Larry in the eye.

He looked away without realizing.

It was too late when he made himself look back.

“I doubt I’ll get married,” Zoe confessed.

“Yeah,” Connor nodded.

“It seems like it’s more trouble than it’s worth.”

Connor snorted and looked between his parents.

“You don’t want a partner?” Cynthia asked. “Someone to have your back, to keep you company, to...”

She looked at Larry expectantly.

He looked away.

“Love?” Connor suggested with a smirk. “I didn’t hear the word love there.”

“That goes without saying.”

“Does it?” Connor raised his eyebrows.

Zoe closed the album. “That was fun.”

Cynthia stroked her arm. “I’m glad you liked it.”

“Please burn your dress.”

“I will do no such thing!”

“If I ever get married, it won’t be in that.”

“Maybe I’ll wear it,” Connor grinned.

“We’ll have to have the hem let out,” Larry said.

“And the sleeves adjusted,” Cynthia nodded.

If Connor was disappointed by his parents’ lack of a reaction, he didn’t let it show.

Zoe stood up and made a show of yawning. “Bedtime.”

Connor stood up too. He left the room without saying a word.

Zoe lingered in the doorway. “Is it worth it? Marriage? Is it really worth it?”

Cynthia opened her mouth to respond.

Larry beat her to it.

He reached out to squeeze her hand. “Yes.”

“Most of the time,” Cynthia added. She smiled as she squeezed him back. “It has its moments.”

Larry let himself laugh.

That was fair.

Evan

“So, how does it feel?”

Evan blinked at his mother and then at the road. “What?”

“Your arm.” Heidi smiled at him quickly. “Does it feel weird?”

Evan rubbed his newly cast-free arm. “Yeah. A little bit.”

“I still say we should’ve kept it.”

“Mom.”

“I could’ve had it bronzed, like your baby shoes.”

“You never bronzed my baby shoes.”

“All the more reason to bronze your cast!”

Evan sulked and slid down in his seat. “I don’t think it would’ve survived the bronzing process.”

Heidi wrinkled her nose. “Probably not.” She turned to flash him another smile. “But still, it was-”

“Mom!”

Heidi saw the red light just in time. She slammed on the brakes.

Evan’s heart did a flip. His mother’s arm flew out to stop him from flying forward.

She shook her head. “Shit. Sorry, sweetie.”

“It’s okay,” Evan mumbled.

“I feel so...” Her hand flopped around as if to say scatterbrained.

Or that her head was about to explode.

It was one or the other.

Evan nodded because they both made sense. “It’s been one of those days.”

“Days?” Heidi snorted. “Try weeks. Months. Years. It never stops, does it?”

Evan stared at his hands.

That did not bode well for his future.

Heidi let her breath out in a huff. “They’re going to announce more budget cuts this week.”

Evan looked at her in alarm.

She gripped the steering wheel a bit tighter. “It’s fine. It’s going to be fine. Even if I... Even if I’m one of those ones they... It’s temporary. This job was always going to be temporary. I’ll be working at a law firm before we know it.”

She flashed him another grin. “And if worse comes to worst, we can always move in with Maggie.”

Evan swallowed dryly.

Maggie’s house was tiny and reeked of cats, even though she didn’t have so much as a fish.

He decided not to point that out.

“I’ll be away at school soon.”

By soon, he meant ten months, give or take.

If he got a scholarship. A good scholarship. A good scholarship at a good school where he would take good classes that would help him land a good job where money would never be an issue.

Even his mother wasn’t optimistic enough to believe that.

He swallowed the thought.

His mother nodded brightly. “How’re your applications coming along?”

“Good,” Evan chirped dutifully.

“Do you want me to look over them?”

“Yeah. Uh. Sure, if you have time.”

“Did you look into that scholarship I sent you? Maisie said it covered all of her daughter’s textbooks.”

“Oh. That’s... That’s good.”

“It’s something. It’s a start.” Heidi flicked the blinker and switched lanes. “Have you started the essay portion yet? Maisie said that’s the most important part.”

“I’ve, uh... I’ve started working on it.”

In his head.

He’d started working on it in his head.

That still counted.

“Did talking to Ms. Ross help at all?”

“Yeah.”

“Did she...” Heidi swallowed visibly. “Did she talk to you about, uh-”

“Did she tell me how to play nice with the other kids?”

Heidi reached over to ruffle his hair. “You’re always nice.”

Evan stared at the floor.

“Does she have a lunch group, like the one Ms. Carrington used to have?”

“Mom... That was... I was seven.”

“So?”

“So, they stuck me in that because Dad left.”

His words lingered in the air.

He stared at his hands.

His mother squeezed the steering wheel.

“I know, but maybe...” Heidi shook her head knowingly. “You’re seventeen.”

“There aren’t many paste-eaters in the twelfth grade.”

Heidi tilted her head quizzically.

“Cammie Rosen. That’s why they stuck her in there.”

“Oh,” Heidi smiled. “I remember Cammie. Whatever happened to her?”

Evan shrugged. “I think she moved.”

“I always liked her mom.”

“I think she moved too.”

Heidi hummed at that. “What about the others? Paul and Michael and what’s her name?”

“Jessa,” Evan said automatically. “They’re around.”

“Do you ever talk to them?”

Evan shook his head.

“Not even Paul? You two had so much fun when we went to the train museum.”

“That was one time.”

“I know, but-”

“We were seven.”

Heidi pressed her lips together.

Her silence said a lot.

Evan slumped down in his seat.

He hadn’t thought about Ms. Carrington’s lunch group in years.

Or months. If he was being honest, it was something he thought about every few months.

The months he was part of a group of misfits.

The months he’d sort of had a group of friends.

Jared had ruined it for him. Because of course he had.

He’d pointed out the obvious, that Ms. Carrington’s social skills club was filled with freaks and weirdos who needed professional help.

And that was that.

The club was ruined for Evan. He needed to get out.

He started masking his weirdness. He kept his head down and flew under the radar.

By third grade, he was practically normal.

Ms. Carrington didn’t ask him back.

“What do you want for dinner? I’m having a serious macaroni craving.”

“Macaroni’s good.”

Heidi’s mouth twisted to the side as she eyed the kitchen. “Except macaroni requires cooking.”

Evan smiled knowingly. “Do you want me to order the pizza or do you want to do it?”

Heidi whipped out her phone. “I’ll do it. I’m the mom.” She ruffled his hair. “It’s my job.”

Evan dropped his backpack on the floor and stretched while she tapped in their order.

He rolled up his sleeve to feel his arm.

It felt weird.

He shook his shoulders until the sleeve fell back down.

His mother noticed that but didn't say a word.

He flopped on the couch and froze. "What's this?"

There were pictures of him everywhere. It was like there'd been an explosion.

His mother pocketed her phone and hurried over to clean the mess. "I knew I forgot something!"

"You-"

"This morning. I kept thinking there was something I was supposed to do before I left. My brain, I swear..." Her hand flopped around.

"What is this?"

"It's for your yearbook."

"My..." Evan blinked at the table. That sentence did not compute.

"I got the email the other day. They want all the senior parents to put something together. It's not due until January, but I figured I'd be early for once."

She looked so proud of herself it made his stomach sink.

"So, you're, uh..."

"I was thinking about doing a collage, but-"

Evan shook his head dazedly.

"I didn't think you'd like that. So, I'm thinking one picture. One picture and one paragraph. Something sappy about how proud I am of my little boy." She reached out to pinch his cheek.

He playfully smacked her away. "Oh. Uh. Great."

She frowned as she rocked back on her heels. "I suppose I should tell your father."

"Oh. Um."

"He doesn't get the school emails."

"Right, uh-"

"He'll probably want me to put both of our names on it."

“Yeah,” Evan nodded.

“But you’ll know it’s really from me,” she winked.

“Yeah.” Evan smiled his most reassuring smile.

It made his mother smile too.

His mother ate and ran.

Class.

At least that was what Evan thought she said.

It didn’t matter.

Class, work, study group.

It was all the same.

It meant he had the house to himself.

He did his homework.

He studied and flossed and went to bed early.

He got in bed early.

He didn’t sleep.

He put the radio on.

Alana’s brother was rambling on about the photography class he was taking. And then it was onto a long, nonsensical monologue about marshmallows.

He wrapped it up by starting a song without introducing it.

Evan covered his ears and turned the volume down.

The shows without Alana were always a bit scattered.

He didn’t turn it off.

He let it play while he stared at his laptop.

He opened his latest letter.

He closed his latest letter.

He wasn't in the mood for that.

Which probably meant he should force his way through.

His phone buzzed.

Jared.

Jared was trying to FaceTime with him.

He tossed the phone like it was hot.

He accepted the call when Jared tried again.

Jared's face filled the screen. He mimicked his head exploding. "What..."

Evan blinked at the phone. "Huh?"

"I have no words."

"Okay," Evan nodded. "So, this will be a short call then."

"Ha ha," Jared deadpanned.

"What do you want?" Evan sighed.

"What makes you think I want something?"

Evan simply stared.

"Yeah..." Jared let his breath out in a huff. "So, your mom called."

Evan squeezed his eyes shut.

"Apparently, we're supposed to tutor Connor Murphy tomorrow night."

Evan reluctantly opened his eyes. "Um."

"How exactly did you get us roped into that?"

"I, uh-"

"Do you still need service learning credits? Can't you go volunteer at a nursing home like a normal person? I bet you'd give an awesome sponge bath."

Evan tilted his head.

Jared frowned when he heard himself. Not just frowned. His expression was priceless.

Evan couldn't help chuckling at that. "You-"

Jared put up a hand to stop him. He tapped his chin and nodded. “No. I stand by what I said. I bet you-”

“This is going to a weird place.”

“Yeah,” Jared agreed. “Well.”

“What else is new?”

“Exactly.” Jared rubbed his eyes and shook his head. “When were you planning to tell me we’re-”

“We’re not tutoring Connor Murphy!”

Jared raised an eyebrow.

“I mean...” Evan made himself breathe. “I didn’t agree to anything.”

“But your mom-”

“My mom thinks... She’s, like, friends with Connor’s mom now or something and-”

“You’re family friends with Connor Murphy now?” Jared grabbed his chest like he’d been deeply, deeply betrayed.

“Kind of? I don’t... I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

It took Evan a second to realize Jared was on the verge of laughter. “Shut up.”

“How did I become a part of this? I’m barely passing science as it is.”

“I don’t...”

Jared snapped his fingers and pointed at the screen. “You’re going to make sure we both pass.”

Evan nearly dropped his phone. “Uh. What?”

“The test. Fair’s fair. If I go with you-”

“I didn’t say I was going!”

“-then you owe me. You have to make sure I pass the test too.”

Evan blinked at his phone. “I’m not letting you cheat off me.”

“Who said anything about cheating? Just... I don’t know. Work some of that Evan magic. Explain what that whole cell thing is all about.”

“We covered that last year.”

It was Jared’s turn to blink. “Oh. I am so screwed.”

“Yeah.”

“No, seriously, like, what are we even learning? I don’t even know. What is this class? How did I get here? How am I going to-”

“Jared.”

“I need a paper bag.” Jared smirked at the camera and took a bow. “And scene.”

Evan clapped sarcastically.

“So, are we going or not?”

“Not.”

Jared made a face. “But you’ll still help me study, won’t you?”

Evan hung up without dignifying that with a response.

There were pictures of them in the yearbook. Ms. Carrington’s lunch group. There were always pictures of them in the yearbook.

One candid shot in each grade’s collage.

They weren’t official pictures because it wasn’t an official club. Just a group of students from each grade that Ms. Carrington had lunch with for various reasons.

Because they were addicted to glue. Because they thought they were a cat. Because their dad left and they couldn’t say a word.

Because they threw a printer at Ms. G.

Evan couldn’t be sure that was the reason Connor Murphy was recruited, but he had a feeling.

Connor wasn’t in his lunch group. The group was full when the printer thing happened.

Connor was in the third grade picture though.

Evan didn’t need to check his old yearbook to know that.

Connor had taken his spot in the club.

Or possibly Michael’s. He’d managed to stop meowing by then.

“I hate to break it to you, dear listeners, but judging from the panic attack Trevor here is having, I think it’s time for a little PSA.”

“This is not funny!”

“It’s a little funny, but I digress.” Alan cleared his throat loudly. “For those of you who are as oblivious to life as my good friend Trevor here, Family Weekend is upon us.”

“I have to go clean my room!”

“It’s not for three days!”

“You’ve seen my room!”

“Your show’s starting in-”

“Cover for me?”

There was a rustling sound, followed by what Evan took to be Alan cursing under his breath.

“All righty then. It looks like you folks are in for a real treat tonight. Another hour of me!”

There was a pause.

A long pause.

Evan tilted his head.

“Yeah,” Alan chuckled. “I’ve got nothing. What’s on your mind tonight, friends? Help a fella out. The lines are open and... that was fast. I didn’t even have to beg. What’s on your mind, caller?”

“Mom wants to know if you want her to press your pants for Saturday.”

“Lanie?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re calling the show?”

“Yeah... Oh. She also says-”

“Couldn’t we be having this conversation via text?”

A pause.

“Yeah...”

“But where’s the fun in that?”

“Exactly.”

“Tell mom no. I’m just wearing jeans to the panel.”

“She says-”

“Tell her that’s non-negotiable and...” Alan sighed into his mic. “I’ll call her later.”

“Kay.”

“And-”

“Have you thought about how you’re going to handle all the questions?”

“What questions?”

“The Q&A. That’s what the panel’s all about, isn’t it?”

“I’ll be-”

“I still say I should go up there with you. You choke under pressure. You know you do. I... I really should be talking to you about this when we’re not on the air.”

“You think?”

“Yeah... Sorry. I suck. I know.”

A pause.

Alan sighed heavily. “Yeah, okay, well, I’ll talk to you about this later then.”

Another pause, followed by one of the worst songs Evan had ever heard.

He covered his ears and fumbled with the volume.

His brain tried to process what he’d just heard.

The panel? What panel?

He looked it up.

It was for Family Weekend. The radio station was hosting a panel of speakers, including Alan.

Over 100 people had already RSVPed.

Evan shook his head at the comments.

The letter.

Several of the people, the parents, mentioned the letter. His letter.

They said it had given them a way to talk to their kids, to connect, to understand what was going on in their heads.

Evan closed his eyes and leaned against the wall.

He turned the volume back up.

The song was over. Thankfully.

“Lanie has a point, actually. I should rehearse for Saturday. Important people are going to be there and I don’t want to blow it by being all... you know. Blech. So, how about it? Any questions, comments, concerns? Particularly ones that you think any discerning parental figures might have.”

A pause.

“You’re on, caller.”

“Hey! So, uh, not a question exactly, but a comment.”

“Fire away.”

“Um...” The caller giggled. “This is weird. I don’t know why I’m doing this.”

“Wait a second...” Alan breathed into his mic. “I know this number. You’re Alana’s friend, aren’t you? The one with the brother.”

“Zoe, yeah.” She giggled again. “Sorry. Um.”

“Lanie’s not here tonight.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“So... You have a comment?”

Zoe breathed into the phone. “Yeah, um. I just wanted to say that, for what it’s worth, your show really has meant a lot to me and to my family. To my brother, mostly, but to my parents... I don’t think they know it, but things have changed. Not completely, but they’re better and your show, the-the whole letter thing, has helped a lot.”

“Really? Thank you. That’s... I love to hear things like that.”

“Yeah, I mean, I know the letter thing was kind of a fluke, but-”

“That’s one way of looking at it.”

“I know Alana... I know the story there, but it’s helped. It’s helped me understand my brother, to... to talk to him. To actually... He got it. It clicked with him, you know. I think... I think it made him feel kind of... I don’t know. Less alone or...”

“There’s been a lot of that going around.”

“Yeah,” Zoe breathed. “I don’t know if I’ll make it to your panel this weekend and even if I did, I doubt I’d actually say any of this in person because you know there’s a difference between rambling on the phone while you should be doing your math homework and-”

“I feel that.”

“Yeah,” Zoe laughed. “So, I just wanted to say thank you. To you, to Alana, to Evan, if he’s listening.”

Evan blinked at the ceiling.

His phone buzzed.

He didn’t look. Not yet.

Zoe laughed again. “And I’m sending you that list of songs.”

“Hey...” Alan huffed.

“Alana’s right. You have terrible taste in music.”

Zoe wasn’t the only one who laughed that time.

Evan reached for his phone.

Jared again.

So we’re doing this now, right?

Evan blinked at the text.

He thought about playing dumb, about asking what Jared meant.

He thought about ignoring the text altogether. It would serve Jared right. Give him a taste of his own medicine.

His phone buzzed again.

We’re actually going to tutor Connor Murphy?

Evan closed his eyes and made a choice.

Yeah.

Connor

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“That’s what you’re wearing?” Cynthia asked as they sat down.

Connor glanced at Zoe automatically. As far as he could tell, there was nothing objectionable about her outfit. It was clean. It didn’t clash horribly. It didn’t show off anything their parents wouldn’t want her to show off.

She smiled when their eyes met. “I think she means you.”

Connor frowned at that.

It had been a while since his clothes had been a topic of conversation. He’d thought they were past that. He’d thought his parents had decided to pick their battles and this wasn’t one worth fighting.

“Why don’t you put on that nice sweater we got you?”

Connor snorted at that.

He wouldn’t be caught dead in that thing, even if it was sweater weather.

He shrugged and reached for the cereal. “I’m good.”

“I’m just saying, it wouldn’t kill you to wear something with some color in it once in a while.”

Zoe attempted to smother her laughter with her hand.

It didn’t work.

Connor stomped on her foot.

She took that as her cue to smirk at him. “Are you talking about that blue sweater you got him for Christmas? I bet it looks great with his eyes.”

“It does,” Cynthia beamed. “That’s why I got it.”

“It’s cashmere,” Connor reminded her.

“So?”

“That’s not exactly school attire.”

“After school then,” Cynthia decided. “You can change when you get home.”

Connor eyed her suspiciously. “Why?”

Cynthia’s eyes widened like that hadn’t occurred to her. “No reason. I was just thinking you might want to-”

Larry rustled the newspaper and reached for his coffee. “He doesn’t need to dress up to impress his friends.”

“I wasn’t saying he-”

“What friends?” Connor demanded.

His parents exchanged a look.

Zoe stared at her bowl.

Connor turned to look at her full on. “What friends?”

“My friends,” Zoe said lightly. She shook her head at their parents.

She shook it like she didn’t know what they were thinking.

Connor turned to look at his mother. “Why should I dress up for Zoe’s friends?”

“Because...” Cynthia pressed her lips together tightly. “Because they’re coming to see you.”

“What?”

“For your test tomorrow. The science test. They’re coming to help you-”

Connor pushed away from the table.

His family braced themselves.

He closed his eyes when he saw that.

He grabbed his bag and stormed out without saying a word.

Progress.

Steve from The Sharing Circle would be so proud.

Zoe looked surprised when she found him waiting by her car. “You’re still here?”

Connor gave her a look that said ‘obviously.’

“I figured you’d be gone by now.”

“It’s your turn to drive.”

“We’re still doing that?” Zoe raised her eyebrows. “Is Mom right? Are you really trying to save the environment, one carpool at a time?”

Connor didn’t bother responding.

She took the hint and unlocked the doors. “So, don’t go and freak yourself out or whatever. It’s a casual thing, this whole study group thing.”

Connor scoffed at that.

“Okay, yeah. Mom’s being Mom and sticking her nose in where it doesn’t belong. It was her idea, by the way. I had nothing to do with it.”

“Who’s coming exactly?”

Zoe exhaled slowly. “Evan and Jared.”

Connor gritted his teeth. He’d figured as much. “Not Alana?”

“Do you want Alana to come?”

Connor shrugged.

Which meant yes.

It would be good to have an ally there. Someone he felt was almost an ally.

Zoe nodded like she got that. “I’ll ask. I’m sure she’d be down for it.”

She started the car and inched forward. “Are you actually going to show?”

Connor tilted his head.

It hadn’t occurred to him that he had the option not to.

He rubbed his eyes.

Mornings were not his thing.

“It could be good for you.”

Connor gave her a look.

“Yeah, yeah, I sound like Mom.” Zoe rolled her eyes. “I’m just saying, at the very least, it should help you pass the test. Evan’s really good at science.”

Connor nodded because he knew that.

Zoe flashed him a grin. “And I can be there for moral support while I study for my French test.”

Two allies.

It was Connor's lucky day.

It was a slow day.

Slow but not long.

It was annoyingly fast.

Fast and slow and uneventful.

Connor drifted from class to class. He kept his head down and his mouth shut. He pretended to be a model student. He even took notes.

He could play the part when he wanted. He could go through the motions and pretend he cared. Sometimes he did. Sometimes school mattered.

Sometimes his future did too.

This was not one of those days. Almost but not quite.

It was close enough.

He got a question right in history. Ms. Brown looked impressed.

He had art last. His favorite class. Second favorite. Maybe first. It was right up there with English.

Because he liked it.

Because it drove his father crazy that he did.

Because his parents thought he should've filled the slot with something that mattered. An AP class. Something academic. Something that would look good on his transcript.

Ms. Ross had encouraged him to go with art.

She thought it was good for him.

And maybe it was.

It was a calming way to end the day.

The calm before the storm.

Connor tried not to think about that.

It was hard not to think about it when Jared insisted on sitting next to him.

“So, what’s for dinner?”

Connor took his time looking up from his drawing. “What?”

“I was told there’d be food.”

Connor shrugged like he didn’t care. Which he didn’t.

He also didn’t know the answer.

“It better be good.”

“It won’t be.”

Jared made a face at that. “When you say not good, do you mean-”

“Healthy and inedible.”

“I was told there might be pizza.”

That was news to Connor. “It’ll be gluten-free if there is.”

“But I like gluten!”

“Then don’t come,” Connor shrugged.

“Oh, you’d love that, wouldn’t you?”

Connor focused on his drawing. It wasn’t his best work. It wasn’t his worst either.

It was better than Jared’s.

He smirked at Jared’s easel. “You call that a hand?”

Jared scowled at his drawing. “Shut up.”

“It looks like garbage. Actual garbage. Like a bag of it.”

“Maybe that’s what I was going for.”

Connor snorted and went back to work. His hand definitely looked like a hand. Even if the nails weren’t quite right.

“Be nice to Evan, okay?”

Connor froze with his pencil in mid-air. “What?”

Jared’s mouth opened and closed like he hadn’t realized he’d spoken.

Connor continued to stare.

Jared put his pencil down and rocked back on his heels. “I’m just saying... Be nice. Don’t...”

“Don’t shove him to the ground?”

“That was weirdly specific.”

Connor stabbed at his drawing.

“Evan’s having second thoughts about this whole thing.”

Connor focused on his shading.

“He’d worked himself into a frenzy by the time I picked him up this morning.”

“A frenzy?”

“Like...” Jared huffed and puffed into his hands. “You know.”

Connor did know. Not from personal experience exactly, but he got it.

He’d been there.

He knew what it was like.

“Don’t come then.”

“You know the more you say that, the more I want to.”

Connor stepped back to examine his work. “I’ll be good.”

“Is that a promise?”

Connor didn’t dignify that with a response.

He decided to walk home.

Zoe had band practice and he couldn’t bring himself to take the bus.

It was a long walk but it was worth it.

It gave him a chance to clear his head.

He was the very picture of Zen when he opened the door.

And then he stepped inside and the feeling was gone.

It was amazing how quickly that could happen.

All because he could hear a conversation he wasn’t meant to be hearing.

His parents weren't expecting him to come home yet.

That much was obvious.

He lingered in the hallway and listened.

"Are you sure about this?" his father asked.

"Yes. For the millionth time."

"Evan--"

"I thought you were onboard with this. You said it would be good for him. For them. For both of them. You said you thought they could be friends."

"I know, but I've been thinking about it and Evan is... How do I put this nicely? He's sensitive. Connor will eat him alive."

"He's stronger than he seems."

A third voice.

Connor raised his eyebrows and crept forward to look.

Evan's mom.

Of course.

It figured.

This was a parental scheme after all.

"And Jared will be there. I'm sure that'll help." Heidi checked the time. "I better go. My shift starts in an hour."

She turned to face Larry. "You don't have to worry about Evan. I'm sure he'll be fine."

"I hope you're right."

Cynthia gave him a look.

He threw his hands up in surrender. "I do. I really do. I want this to work."

"We all want this to work," Heidi breathed.

The room fell silent.

Connor's heart skipped a beat.

"We're going to order pizza for dinner," Cynthia said. "So, you don't have to worry about feeding Evan."

Heidi nodded like that hadn't dawned on her. "Oh. Good."

"He can stay here until you get off if you don't want him going home to an empty house."

"It's fine," Heidi breathed. "He's used to it and I don't get off until five."

Cynthia stared at her for a beat. "AM?"

Heidi reached for her purse. "I really should... Don't tell Evan I was here. He's weirded out enough as it is."

Cynthia pretended to zip her lips.

Connor moved away from the door just in time.

Heidi nearly ran into him anyway. "Oh... Connor! What..." She glanced over her shoulder.

His parents came to check.

Connor took that as his cue to leave.

He ran up the stairs without saying a word.

They didn't follow him up.

He hadn't really expected them to.

Them.

Two of them.

It was never a good sign when his dad was home this early.

He didn't want to think about that.

He put his headphones on and tried to do his homework.

He wasn't successful.

Zoe got home around five.

She came in his room without knocking.

He opened his mouth to yell at her.

She motioned for him to take his headphones off.

So, there was that. There was a very real chance she'd knocked and he hadn't heard.

He scowled at her anyway.

She rolled her eyes. "Alana's here."

"Okay," Connor nodded.

"Are you coming?"

Connor considered his options. Because he had options. He had the option to shove Zoe out of his room and lock his door.

That was a perfectly valid thing to do.

He didn't do it though.

He shrugged and followed her out.

They found Alana in the living room.

Their parents were nowhere to be seen.

Connor raised his eyebrows at that.

He'd been expecting hovering. So much hovering.

"Dad's on a call," Zoe explained. "Mom's in the kitchen if we need her."

Alana held up her binder. "I'm thinking we should split this up. We'll each take a section and quiz each other. Dibs on 4.1."

Connor nodded because he didn't care. And because he didn't know what she was talking about. 4.1? The hell was that?

Zoe nodded at the loveseat. "I'll leave you to it."

Connor watched her open her French book. "They're not here yet."

The girls exchanged a look.

"They're not coming?" Connor guessed.

Alana bit her lip. "Jared is. He had a thing with his brother and then... I offered to pick Evan up for him, but..."

"They'll be here," Zoe chirped.

"We can wait," Alana decided. She pulled out her laptop. "I'll cue up the study music to get us in the mood."

Zoe eyed the computer suspiciously. “It isn’t *Glee*, is it?”

Connor didn’t wait to hear what kind of music Alana liked. He hoped she had better taste than her brother.

She had to have better taste than her brother.

A monkey would have better taste in music than her brother.

He went to the kitchen under the guise of getting a snack

He was relieved to see his mother wasn’t there. He wasn’t in the mood for a pep talk.

A pep talk or concern. He wasn’t sure which would be worse.

He poured himself a glass of water and stared at the wall, the fridge, the door.

No one came through it.

It was a blessing and a curse.

He wasn’t in the mood for a pep talk, but he didn’t want to be left alone with his thoughts either.

It didn’t take them long to start to spiral.

He’d been looking forward to this.

He was semi-surprised to realize that.

It felt like something that was supposed to happen.

It angered him to think it might not.

Who was he kidding?

Of course, it wasn’t going to happen. Why would anyone actually want this to happen? Why would anyone choose to be around him?

But it was supposed to happen. He couldn’t shake that.

The doorbell rang.

He braced himself.

He heard them come in.

His heart sped up.

He didn’t move. He sipped his water and didn’t move.

He felt like he was in middle school again. It was not a pleasant thought.

He wished he was high.

He wished he didn't wish he was high.

He'd started getting high in middle school. It had taken the edge off everything.

The rejection, the ridicule, his life.

He was always the weird kid. Too loud, too rude, too much.

Too much for everyone to handle.

To want to handle.

It was easier to fade away. Better.

Better for everyone.

Unless it wasn't.

Sometimes he thought it wasn't. Not completely. Maybe not at all.

Laughter.

He could hear them laughing.

He bristled at that.

It wasn't at him.

He clenched his fists and reminded himself that. There was no logical reason for them to be laughing at him.

"There are snacks in the kitchen," Zoe said.

He braced himself.

A figure appeared in the doorway.

One figure.

Evan.

They stared at each other for a beat.

"Hi."

Connor took a breath.

This was it. It was his turn to speak.

He had to say something.

Emphasis on the something.

This moment wasn't everything, but it could be something.

Maybe his gut was right.

Maybe there was something there.

A connection, an understanding, a friend.

Maybe it would be something.

Maybe it would be everything.

Maybe it would mean nothing at all.

He took a breath.

He didn't know why he was worried.

In the end, it didn't really matter, did it?

This was a moment, a blip, a start.

There was only one thing he could say.

“Hey.”

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap.

If someone had told me in June 2017 that a semi-random, Tonys-related YouTube spiral would wind up inspiring me to write over a million words about a show that I wouldn't see live until the tour came here in March 2022, I would've said...

Well, actually, I wouldn't have been surprised.

My reaction probably would've been along the lines of, “Really? Huh... Yeah. I can see that becoming a thing that happens.”

DEH spoke to me right away. It spoke to the lifelong anxiety-sufferer in me.

And it spoke to the part of me that values characters over plots. I loved that there were no true villains in DEH, that there were good and bad things about every character.

I've really enjoyed writing my versions of these characters for the last five years. Writing has always been something that calms me and entertains me. I think it's been good for me to get back to that after letting it slip away.

Thank you to everyone who has been reading my stories for the past five years, to those who are just discovering them now, and to those who fall somewhere in between.

I don't say it often enough because I'm constantly bouncing back and forth between loving that people are reading and (hopefully) enjoying my stories to being completely weirded out by the idea that my words are actually out there.

I really do appreciate all the support though.

If this note sounds like goodbye, it's because there were several times when I thought it would be. This story has, in many ways, felt like my last hurrah with these characters.

Now that I'm here though, I'm not so sure.

I'm not currently planning to write anything else in this universe.

I hope to return to "The Royal When" someday.

I'm pretty sure "Worlds Apart" is a lost cause, but you never know with my brain.

I have a vague idea that keeps bouncing around my head because I caught part of "Kate & Leopold" when I was at my aunt's house.

I'm keeping my fingers crossed that no one lets me watch "Joe Versus the Volcano" again.

So, we'll see.

It won't surprise me if December 2027!me looks at this note, shakes her head, and says, "You thought you were done? Mwahahaha!"

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!