

BASH

The thing about Wild Kyle is, he's never lost a goddamned thing.

So when I tell him about Layla, my recently departed (his word, not mine) ex, I don't even flinch at his response: "Fuck that shit. Hit it and quit it, man."

He offers his monogrammed chrome flask—*KJT*—that's filled with something vile, I refuse, he chugs. "What the fuck is in that?" I ask.

With squinted eyes and a puckered pout, he's trying hard to swallow like it'll really impress all these fine young, partygoers if he can keep the burning liquid down the chute without spewing. He raises a finger while a cloud of sour-smelling gas explodes from his mouth. "Moonshine. Eighty proof."

"Holy shit! *Why* would you do that to yourself?"

A crooked smile crawls up from the corners of his lips. "Why *not*?" He struggles with another sip, nearly blows chunks right on the flimsy card table, and then excuses himself up the stairs to, I assume, his grave. Leaning back in a plastic fold-out chair, I'm in this tiny basement room that's starting to swell. I don't know half these people, and the ones I do, pretend not to know me. The music is blaring, thumping, through the walls of Kyle's cousin's friend's college boyfriend's place just outside of East Clifton. It's close enough

for me to crawl home if I need to, far enough that Ma won't hear about it.

"I need a beer pong partner," a sultry voice says from behind. I know those paralyzing, knife-wielding sounds; rasped and smoky as all hell. It's Layla, my kryptonite. I spin around to see a cigarette pressed between her plump, scarlet lips, her lashes batting at me.

"So go ask your dude," I say, turning away from her. She rests a hand on my shoulder, creeps around to my side and crawls onto my lap. She's wearing this black miniskirt that shows off her curves and thigh-high boots, and after that, there's nothing left to see.

"We broke up," she says with a pout. She pinches the cigarette, pulls it from her lips, and gently nudges it into mine. Our eyes are locked, and from the corner of my mouth, I blow a thin stream of smoke into the air. It curls between us, disintegrating into vapor. She likes this, I see, but I know that face. I've seen it a hundred times. It's the same face she dragged into the rink I work at, the same face she made at the dude whose jock she was all up on *at* said rink, and the same fucking face that dumped my sorry ass in front of said dude at said rink just one week ago.

She wants me to break. Part of me *wants* me to break. I mean, *goddamn*, look at her. Dirty blond hair that trails in loose waves below her shoulders, nose pierced, a few tats on her forearm, mostly butterflies and shit, but rock as hell. Her icy eyes sear through me, and a flash of the future pops into my brain, and she's just not in it. Didn't see it last week—I was too close to it. I see it now. With a firm grip on her hips, I lift her from the warmth of my lap and toss her to her cold, unfeeling heart—I mean feet.

Thanks to the height of her heels, she wobbles, nearly falls straight to her ass. "Bash!" she screeches. Her eyes are bulging, and that pouty thing she thinks is working isn't (any-more). "I miss you. I was wrong."

Reminds me of something I saw scribbled on a gym locker. I inhale and blow another cloud of smoke toward her with a wink. “If you’re looking for sympathy, you’ll find it in the dictionary between *shit* and *syphilis*.”

I leave her there to, I don’t know, think about how actions have consequences, or whatever, and find myself up on the main level where the awful chest-thumping music streams. No sign of Kyle, so I hang in the corner, where I’m mostly alone. Back against the wall, I enjoy the cigarette still pursed between my lips—her lovely parting gift to me. Thanks, doll. Directly in front of me are about a dozen sweaty bodies, bending and swaying, grinding against each other beneath the dim lights that flicker primary colors. From here, they’re just faceless, gestural shapes on a dark canvas—something I could draw if I had my charcoal lump and kneaded eraser.

“Want to dance?” a sweat-drenched girl asks me.

She’s grabbing at my hand. I pull back. “I don’t dance; just watch.”

“That’s super creepy,” she says. “I like it.” She smiles with the jagged teeth of a great white as her hands paw at me to move deeper into the nucleus of the cesspool. I resist still, mostly because, selfishly, I want to smoke this free cancer stick to the nub. I keep my cool because Layla lurks nearby, an amber bottle in one hand, my (metaphoric) balls in the other. She’s looking around, probably for her next victim, and this chatty girl, man, she does *not* care I’m *not* listening. She’s talking about her phone bill and how she can’t figure out where the extra charges come from—“I mean, I talk the same amount every month, so it should be the *exact* same,” she says—and I’m still looking at Layla, pretending not to, because I know exactly where that eye contact leads and I don’t have enough soul left for her to pulverize a third time. And before you even ask, no, she wasn’t worth it.

Behind this girl, who is now spewing a diatribe about the

government spying on us through our phones, I lose sight of Layla for just a moment. The crowd parts in a zigzag fashion and beneath the light machine, where the red, green, and blue hit the hardest, I see *her*—this statuesque beauty—hiding behind a trail of long brown hair and thick-framed glasses. With her hands folded snug in her lap, she’s looking around, sinking farther into the couch’s wilted threads as if hoping to not be seen, but *I* see her because hiding is typically what I do too.

“My God,” I say. The cigarette hangs from my bottom lip, and this girl, who finally stops talking, is still looking at up me, glitter plummeting from her silver-tinted eye shadow. The flakes dance down to the tops of my boots like little asshole snowflakes. That shit should be banned. She follows my eyes across the floor to the big, plaid couch, letting her smile fade. Losing interest (finally), she drops my hand and disappears into the sea of people from which she first emerged.

With my heart nearly beating out of my chest, I watch Couch Girl. The way she tucks her hair behind her ears with precision, the way she nudges her falling glasses up the bridge of her nose, the way she pretends she’s not as earth-shatteringly stunning as she really is. Radiance surrounds her—not a halo, but some kind of ethereal glow—and I can’t look away. She looks up at me. Once, twice, three times; tries to avoid my eyes, but can’t. For the length of a whole song, my gaze doesn’t abandon her, and by the middle of the next song, she’s smiling at me. *Score*. Normally, I’d hang back, wait and see if we “accidentally” cross paths, but Layla’s determined eyes are on me so I up my game. To finish her.

I push through the haze and find my way to Couch Girl. She looks up at me with these electric green eyes that are more evident through her lenses, and I do something I thought I’d never in a million years do—hold out my hand.

“I don’t dance,” she says, reluctant.

“Me either. Too many germs.” A few seconds pass before she decides to take my humble offering. I pull her to her feet, and our palms smash together and slide across the dampness. This would normally gross me out, but I kind of want to linger in it with her. Gently, I lead her to the center of the floor where *we* are now gestural shapes on this dark canvas, too.

“Help me out here,” I say. “See that girl over there?” I point to Layla with my middle finger. A silent dig, if you will.

She nods.

“I need her to see us talking.”

She scrunches up her face. “I’m not getting in the middle of whatever *that* is.” Her finger is waving around, grabbing Layla’s attention. “But thanks.”

As she tries to walk away, I tug on her sleeve. Eyebrows arched, and my own full puppy-lipped pout now in full effect. “Please.”

She must sense my sadness (read: desperation), because with one sharp sigh and a roll of her beautiful eyes, she digs her feet firmly into the floor. “Okay, fine. Just for a minute though.”

We’re not dancing, not swaying or grinding, but here we are, in the epicenter of it all. She crosses her arms, I cross mine, too. “So are we going to actually talk or just pretend?” she snaps.

“Who the hell *are* you?” I ask with a smirk.

She looks down. “Who *am* I? You mean *what name was I given at birth*, or *who am I* in a general sense?”

I start to respond, but she interrupts.

“Because, in said general sense, I’m a girl at a party I should’ve never come to but did and am now trapped in this weird interaction between subjects A and B while I’d much rather be at home teaching my chunky cat how to drink from a running faucet, thank you very much.”

With my gaze pressed hard on her porcelain skin, I drop

the last bit of cigarette to the floor and twist the cinder into the grooves until it burns no more. My smile grows, and all of a sudden, I don't care if Layla's watching or not. "Fair enough."

"Who are *you*?" she replies with a touch of snark.

I look down to the holes in my shirtsleeve where the fabric has worn, and I realize I have two choices here. I can tell her the lame, true story of my life and wait for her to walk away, or I can do the opposite and hope that, for one perfect night, I'm allowed to feel this way about a girl who's way out of my league, knowing the second I leave here, this, whatever *this* is, leaves with it.

Plus, it'd totally piss Layla off, and that makes it sweeter.

"Well," I say, "in a general sense, I'm a boy at a party I should've never come to but did and am now *gloriously* trapped in this enlightened conversation with, probably, the most captivating girl in the entire house. In an even generaler sense"—she stops me, tells me that's not a word—"I'm nobody. Well, until I saw you." My smile widens. To sell it.

She blushes. Her fingers fumbling through her long, silky strands, she objects. "One, that's so ridiculously cliché, and two, statistically speaking, you're a percentage of this party as a whole house equation. Without the exact number of bodies—I estimate around thirty-seven—you're something like 2.7027 percent somebody without ever seeing me."

My heart drops through this creaky, wooden floor, and this smile that's still pasted—it's about to rip my face in two. The forces of the earth have rumbled beneath my feet and combined, climbing up through the dirt core, into my heart. We stand here, for, I don't know, what feels like an infinity (she abruptly explains infinity is a concept and there's no way to solve for x , so in reality, we can't actually stand here that long), and all these things start flying out of my mouth—how I graduated last year, I'm only in town for tonight—and with

every passing lie, I think, *You're no better than Kyle*, which makes me sick—like, physically ill with the sweats and a weird clamminess and all these symptoms that remind me how I felt when I first met Layla.

When the song ends, we hold on to this moment that, in the space between, feels like a million electrodes have begun to rattle and vibrate. I feel it fuse to my bones. It connects us together, grounds us, right here, right now. Layla's gone—*who cares now?*—but just as I start to ask for her number, or the name she was given at birth, a tiny little thing with big, springy curls that dangle over one eye pulls at Couch Girl's arm.

“Ready to go?” the friend asks. She's looking me over in this protective kind of way, and I know what she's thinking because I beat her to it.

While the two of them decide, a hand slaps the back of my shirt hard enough to leave a mark. I turn around to see Kyle's cousin's friend's college boyfriend with a worried look on his face. “Your friend might need to go to the hospital. He's, like, not waking up.”

With a heavy sigh, something that follows Kyle's hijinks often, I silently agree to retrieve my sort-of-ill-behaved dog that does as he pleases. Before I can even *think* about what to say to Couch Girl next, I spin around and she, and her tiny friend, are gone.

Just like that, it's over before it even started.

Story of my goddamned life.

Two days have passed since the house party, and I'm still thinking about what an idiot Kyle is. The only chance I had to talk to (probably) the most interesting lady specimen I've ever met, and he totally screwed me. One night to be all the things I'm not, maybe make out a little, and instead, I spent the wee hours of yesterday making sure his ass didn't die of alcohol poisoning—again. And now here we are,

hanging out at 8:30 P.M., on a stormy Sunday, in one of his dad's empty developments doing what Wild Kyle does best—drinking.

Kid doesn't use his head because he's never had to. If I had everything he has, I'd be eating three square meals, filling my tank with premium gas, and sleeping on something more than an old spring mattress in a piece of shit trailer—all these things, these simple ideas that most normal people get on a human level—are things Kyle couldn't get if you nailed them to his brain with a stake and hammer.

But I guess if I had those things, or even one, I wouldn't be *me*. I'd be *him*. And right now, *him* is sitting in a yoga-like position, legs crossed, eyes closed, fingers pinched up at his sides like he's taking a serious shit. He drinks straight from the bottle of his dad's top-shelf vodka, and with one flick of his metal skull lighter, he burns the end of a fresh joint. But me? I've got my legs spread out in front of me, a cheap can of off-brand beer that tastes like asphalt in one hand, a limp cigarette balanced in the other, as I try to sketch with a jagged piece of compressed charcoal on a napkin.

He makes a deep hum and exhales a cloud of smoke through the side of his lips, currently buried under an avalanche of wiry hairs. "You're so whipped! I can tell you're still obsessing over Layla. Didn't know she'd be there, I swear."

I shake my head, surprised he noticed anything more than the toilet rim.

"Forget that heartless bitch. Didn't you see that hottie in the spandex thing? Oohhh! I'm not religious, but goddamn, TAKE. ME. TO. CHURCH!"

I don't dare tell him about Couch Girl. Conversing only encourages the idiocy, and I don't need him fucking up any more of my shit. Besides, I'd rather let him think I'm still hung up on Layla because (1) in a totally whacked-out way,

it's kind of endearing that he cares, and (2) it gives him something to focus his negative energy on—that won't fuck up any more of my shit.

“This is good stuff, man. Sure you don't want some?” He pulls the stick from his mouth and offers it up.

“Nah,” I say. “My gift for helping with that wretched chem test last week. Besides, Camilla's way past that now, and I sure as hell don't want it.”

He nods, knows Camilla—Ma—is the reason we sometimes come drink in this dark, empty neighborhood. It started months ago during her weekly chemo treatments and became this thing I couldn't get out of—I tried. Among the half dozen vacant houses and lots Kyle's dad invested in, this one is my favorite, because even though it's not finished, I can tell it could really be something. Kind of like me.

There's a long silence, a shift in the air between us, as he shuffles around to stretch his lanky limbs. He lifts the joint into the air and unfolds his legs. “So did you pass the test or what?”

I take a swig of the warm beer, my last one, my only one. “No. Goddamn reactions and rates. That whole collision theory got me. How am I supposed to remember what affects the rate of a reaction? If I knew, I wouldn't be in school where you learn things—I'd be Stephen Hawking or some shit. Not trudging through my mandatory four-year sentence like a freakin' dunce.”

“*Five* for you.”

“Hey—everyone should be a freshman twice. It makes a *real* man outta ya.”

Kyle's obnoxious laugh echoes through the wooden slats where walls should be. “Like John Locke says, ‘There is only one thing which gathers people into seditious commotion, and that is,’ he pauses for dramatic effect, “*OPPRESSION!*”

I focus on the rough charcoal lines and edges I'm sketching,

blending with the side of my palm as I go. “I don’t think the right to rebel applies at East Clifton High. Unless you have no interest in graduating in the spring. I, on the other hand, have no choice.”

He holds his hand in the air and waves his clenched fist, his voice strained. “Then we will take a stand, my brother. We. Will. Start. THE REVOLUTION!”

I shake my head, mostly because I’m used to Kyle’s dramatics. “Why don’t you get a head start on that and I’ll jump on the bandwagon later. *After* I pass my classes.”

“Goddamn, man. ‘The surest way to corrupt a youth is to instruct him to hold in higher esteem those who think alike than those who think differently.’ Why can’t we all think like Nietzsche? If you won’t help me start the new rebellion, don’t sweat it. In five years no one will remember you, me, big-boobed Brittany, or easy Emma or any other East Clifton POS’s. Well, *I* might remember those hotties, but that’s because I’m a perv. Point is, just get through it, then forget about it.”

Even in his drunken philosophical babble, it sounds easy enough, except I have to sweat it. Like flunking out kind of sweat it. If Ma only knew how much I’m really sweating, it would kill her faster than the cancer. Besides, Kyle’s got his life figured out. He’ll sleep in on graduation day, wake up to a big breakfast the maid will deliver to him in bed, Mr. Taylor will give him the keys to one of their fancy cars, he’ll stroll in for the rolled-up diploma (that’s just a piece of paper to him), then walk off the stage with a job handed to him on a silver fucking platter. Doesn’t matter if he’s earned it (because he hasn’t), if he’s qualified (because he’s not), or if he’ll even say thank you (because he won’t).

A sarcastic chuckle escapes me. I can’t help it. “I’m *trying* to get through it, dude. I’ve got no other options but, what—work at a skating rink my whole life? No effing way.”

“Dad could hook you up with a job.”

“Buying real estate in shitty places and then selling to a bunch of schmucks? Rather die.”

“Then come to New York with me next summer. Use our connections. Work for a bit, save your money, buy your own gallery.”

“Thanks, man,” I say with a sigh, “but I can’t make that much that fast. Besides, I’d rather earn my show, not buy it. Wasn’t it one of your half-baked inspirational posters or philosophy man-crushes who said ‘Intelligence without ambition is a bird without wings’? I’ve got wings, and I’ll find a way to use ’em.”

He looks annoyed, his ramblings backfiring. He presses the butt of the joint into a floor tile with a sizzle. His words are beginning to slur and melt together.

“Psshhtt. Artists don’t make squat. They’re pretentious hipster assholes who think they’re creating something that means something even when it means nothing. Like two circles. There’s not a deep, contextual meaning in the roundness of them. They’re fucking circles.”

He stares at me, unaware he’s dissing the only thing I’m actually good at (other than dodging class and ignoring him). “You don’t think there’s meaning in something like, say, this?” I hold up the finished portrait of a black grizzly bear with Kyle’s scruffy beard. He’s sitting on a tricycle in the same yoga-like position as Kyle, joint and all. A swirled cloud of smoke is lifted from the bear’s head forming words that read *We. Will. Start. THE REVOLUTION.*

He holds the flimsy napkin between his fingers, eyes expanding, jaw agape. “Bash,” he says quietly, “this is,” his voice strengthens, “AWESOME! Love that the beard is in full swing.”

“Thought your valiant effort should be recognized.”

“Given the hairiness of my genetic predecessors, I *thought*

it'd be cake." He strokes the few sparse hairs sprouting from his chin. "But look at it—I'm like a hairless cat with a rash."

I laugh, set my charcoal block to the floor beside me. "It's only been three days since you started. Give it a whole month. By then, you might hit sheepdog mode. Never know."

The light from the lantern is flickering, causing our shadows to dance across the wood, and although I'd never tell him in a million years, through all of this, I'm still hung up on Couch Girl. It doesn't even matter. I mean, it's not like I'll ever see her again, so why can't I let it go? I blame Layla. And Global Warming. And Kyle, just because.

I crank up the volume on my phone and select a track—something Johnny Cash, for my ma—and wait for Kyle's inevitable eye roll.

"Ugh," he says. "It's so . . . what's the word?"

"Rustic," I say. "Vintage. Classic."

"More like depressing. Melancholy. Buzzkill."

"Fine," I say, skipping to the next song, "Comfortably Numb."

A smile twists up and out from his squirrely mustache. "Now *that's* the stuff."

"Just another version of depressing. Melancholy. Buzzkill."

"No way, man. HUGE difference. Floyd completely changed the way people get high. It's un-American to have one without the other."

Through the vibrations of the song, the rain beats harder on the roof like it's competing for our attention. Kyle's eyes sink farther, nearly closing completely, his body swaying to keep balance. I shake the last couple drops free from my beer can and crunch it between my fingers, tossing it aside to the pile we've created over the last couple months. Since Mr. Taylor all but gave up on this house and the five others surrounding us.

“You about ready to drop me home?” I ask. His head is now in his hands. The alcohol has officially set in—hard. He shakes his head. Didn’t get the title “Wild Kyle” for nothin’. Dude doesn’t have an off button, just

1. Go,
2. Go Harder, or
3. Go Until You Pass Out.

“Want me to drive? You can crash at my place.” As soon as I say the words, I’m calculating where he would sleep. There are only two options, both equally shitty: the lumpy mattress on the floor or the broken recliner in the front room. I really don’t want him on either.

He looks up at me, his eyes glazed over, mouth bone dry. “No to both.”

I’m relieved. “Thought your dad was on a business trip,” I say. “How’s he gonna know if we don’t tell him?”

“*No one* drives the Benz but me. If Dad finds out I took his prized gift from Bono or Bon Jovi or whothelhellver it was he sold a house to, if there’s a scratch or a spot of charcoal, or the scent of whatever cheap-ass Axe cologne you’re wearing in the driver’s seat, he’ll know and I’m dead. Can’t let you get dead, too. You’ve got plans to be the next Van Gogh or Michelangelo or Raphael or Donatello, so dying might, you know, interfere.” He laughs at himself, words trailing. “*He* doesn’t even drive the thing. You know that. It just sits, locked up like some secret trophy. Someone’s gotta appreciate the finer things Dad works for.”

My eyes are locked into the ruby metallic sheen. “Imagine all the hungry kids he could feed with the price of this car.”

“Rhode Island.”

My brows dip. “A lot of starving kids there, huh?”

“A shitload.” He stands unsteadily, straightening his

posture and widening his eyes to show me he's okay. "I'm good to drive. Trust me."

Trust him? Can't remember a time I did that. We're barely friends when he's sober, and that's only because we lived with the Taylors when Ma brought us to America for "a better life and all that shit" (her words, not mine). I was little when she responded to an ad for a chamber maid for some rich, white family, and LOOK AT US NOW! Things were fine until Kyle's witch of a mom kicked us out on the street without warning. I still don't know why all that went down. Needless to say, we look back on those days fondly. Not.

But through all the chaos, Kyle, an only child lost in the shuffle of his parent's fucked-up marriage, clung to me, forced the whole brotherhood thing to happen. After all these years, and as much as I protest, it stuck, unfortunately. I guess he's the closest thing I have to family, other than Ma. The thing is, when Kyle's drinking, a moodier, darker version emerges from his tall, slender frame. I learned a long time ago not to challenge Drunk Kyle, or it's my head on that silver platter I previously mentioned. And right now, I need my head. So when he says to trust him, the only choice I have is to buckle up tight.

He jingles the keys from his pocket, and we make a dash for the car through the pouring rain. As the wind howls, lightning brightens the sky in bold flashes, illuminating an otherwise blackened cul-de-sac. I slip in, wait for the seat warmer to do its thing, and clasp the buckle together. I smell the alcohol on his breath, and when I look at him white knuckling the wheel, I wonder if I should have insisted I drive. Like in a 'don't take NO for an answer' kind of way.

He turns the engine, twists the radio's volume all the way up to the heavy metal playlist he has synced. Here we go. The fast drums and furious screams only add to Kyle's state. His eyes lock onto mine for just a second, wide and crazy, as he sticks out his tongue and thrashes his head around to the

four-on-the-floor beat like he's caught a second wind. My stomach twists in knots of regret, and it's not from flat beer.

"Slipknot, dude!" he screams. "They wipe their asses with the music you listen to!" He peels out of the driveway, screeching the tires against the pavement, then slams on the brakes.

"Dude," I say, my hands clinging to the seat. "Chill."

"Oh, *I'm* chill," he says. There's a lull, but the crazy is still fermenting in his eyes as he revs the engine. It roars, chases the thunder through the clouds. Ma would kill me if she knew I didn't steal his keys.

"Don't," I say. My face is flat, I'm not kidding, and he knows it. I don't need another ding on my arrest record. I'm nearly eighteen—they'll try me as an adult if we're pulled over for a DUI.

"Okay, okay," he says. "You should probably drive." As I unbuckle my belt, he lays his hand on the shift, pretends to put it in park. The moment I have my fingers on the door handle, he presses hard on the gas, jerking me back to the warmed seat. He laughs like the Joker, his eyes piercing mine.

"What the hell, dude?" I quickly rebuckle and grab ahold of the dash as he swerves around every rounded street. "*Idiota!*" I shout (Ma would be proud I still use my Portuguese). "Slow down!"

His eyes are on everything but the road, one hand off the wheel, then he lets go completely to roll his window down. The rain falls like bullets, coating the windshield with a thick, blurred paste we can barely see through. I throw my hands on the wheel, try to steer from the passenger seat.

"This is FREEDOM!" he yells through the crack in his window. "Total control! Free yourself from the shackles of our screwed-up democracy!"

I'm leaning over him, my ribs collapsing on the middle

console as I narrow my eyes and try to see the yellow lines. “Kyle!” I snap. “I’m not kidding—slow down before you kill us!”

He rips my hands off just as we doughnut around the final bend, to the mouth of the neighborhood’s entrance. Headlights gleaming in a muddled, choppy ray, something darts out in front of us so fast, I could argue neither of us saw it coming. The object hits the front bumper and the impact flings me into the door, slowing Kyle’s lead foot.

“What the hell was that?” he asks. “Did you see it?”

While the car crawls along the road, far past the point of impact, I whip my head back to see a light flicker atop the hill behind us. “Should we check? Might be a dog or baby deer or something. I think we have to call the cops so they can shoot it.”

“Shit. Shit. Shit.” Kyle’s disoriented, sweat forming on his brow. “We can’t call the cops! I smell like vodka, and look at me—I’m high as fuck.”

Think, Bash. Think. I swallow, look him over, the fear spilling out of him. “Trade me places. I’ll say I was driving.”

“They’ll make you take a Breathalyzer too. No, no way. They’ll call my dad, and we’ll both get busted.”

“I only had one beer. I’m totally sober.”

“You’re underage—they’ll still arrest us, and I can’t get another DUI. Dad warned me—he said, ‘Kyle, if this happens again, kiss your car, your friends, your life good-bye.’ I can’t, Bash, I can’t.”

I bite my fingernail and try to see behind us through the rain, but it’s pitch-black. “Then let me drive you home, and I’ll come back and check. I’ll take the blame or make something up if anyone catches me.” Despite his unparalleled ability to fuck my shit up, Kyle’s my stupid pseudo brother, and he’s gonna leave Clifton and actually be something—run a company or buy a country or something so beyond my comprehension—I can’t just stand here and let him throw it

all away. Not when he's always been there. Because me? I've got nothing to lose.

Not a dime.

His head wobbles, his eyes nervously darting. He's seriously considering this, because when it comes to Wild Kyle, if it's in his best interest, he usually takes it. "Didn't you promise your mom you'd stay out of trouble?"

"Didn't *you* promise your dad you'd stop drinking and getting high?"

He points his finger at me. "Good point."

"So move. I'll drive."

He pauses, swallows a big burp. "No, wait. They'll wonder how you got the car. Forget it. We're just gonna go. This never happened. It's fine, I'm fine, everything's fine."

"But we hit *something*. Don't you want to make sure it's dead? Like, you know, you have a heart or something?"

He revs the engine again. "Dad gets a ding in one of his other cars, he wears black for a week. If he finds out about this, bye-bye, NYC. Besides, you're an accomplice now. If someone busts me, we're both done."

His tone and eye contact more ominous, I turn my head back once more, ignore the sinking feeling in my gut. My fingers clench the belt buckle tight. "Okay. But drive slow."

With shaking hands, Kyle gently pushes the gas, splashing the damning water up behind us. Now, he's not driving fast, he's driving guilty. In the exact moment I'm begging for my life, I have sudden clarity over the chem test I bonked. The collision theory suggests reactions happen, no matter what, with a few important factors that decide the collision outcome:

1. **Temperature.** Kyle's energy changes when he drinks, making him more likely to collide with something.
2. **Concentration.** If there is more substance in his system, like copious amounts of liquor and weed,

there is a greater chance the rate of the reaction will happen faster.

3. **And pressure.** As it increases, Kyle is more likely to have more collisions.
4. (I'm screwed).

birdie

What is *love* anyway?

It's not logical, something you can prove. There is no solid data to back up phrases like "soul mate" or "heartbreak." They're not real, just ideas people cling to so they can put names on feelings that are actually chemical reactions in the brain. The dictionary says love is defined as "a profoundly tender, passionate affection for another person." If I rely on that, I've *never* been in love, and if I'm held to the use of *passionate affection*, I never will be. All I know about love is from movies, books, and songs, where everything is wrapped up with some sappy, unbelievable ending. The unhappy truth is, *reality* is, people cheat and lie, keep secrets, and leave. Because it's human nature.

What I *have* are facts. And the primary fact I'm stressing over is, a couple of days ago, I did something incredibly, unexplainably, undeniably, stupid—I snuck out of the house and went to what my best friend, Violet, calls "a rager" in East Clifton. I could say it was only for a few minutes and I didn't have fun and I shouldn't have gone (lies). I could say there wasn't a boy there with beautiful brown skin and dark, silky locks, who absolutely *didn't* intrigue me (more lies). I could blame it on stress from college essays or this random job I'm about to start so I can save for the fall (so true, it hurts), but really, it's much more than that. Plus, my nosy brat

of a sister, Brynn, totally caught me sneaking back in, so, there's no way I can pretend it never happened. I know *she* won't.

"What's wrong with *you*?" Brynn asks, with her tongue curling in disgust.

"Nothing," I say. "I'm fine." I shift in my seat to stare out the window but I still feel her staring a hole through the side of my face—something she's done as long as she's been alive.

"You look like you're going to puke. Are you going to puke?"

"No," I snap. "I said I'm fine."

Benny hangs over his car seat to stare at me, too. "I'm fine!" He repeats, his voice rising in excitement at the end.

Brynn shushes him, then whips her head back around to me. Her dingy brown hair is covered in braided beads and feathers from the Americana Festival that happened three effing days ago. It smells like sewer. "You're *not* fine," she whispers, loudly. "It's all over your stupid, perfect face. Ugh. So annoying."

I back away, casually pinching my nose shut so I don't have to breathe the debris embedded in her scalp, or smell her rancid breath. The radio is a low murmur, but even through the rain, I hear the music streaming through the speakers. I draw my attention to the rhythmic droplets that splash the window. There's something about the *pat pat pat*, the smell that lingers long after it has passed. Makes me feel alive.

I roll down my window to feel the cool mist on my cheeks. The pellets, which are about half a centimeter, fall hard and fast (probably exceeding the typical seven to eighteen miles per hour in this kind of weather). But it's hard to calculate. I'm squeezing my brain like a sponge, but it's parched. If I could crawl into the eye of storm, I would. It'd suck a lot less than telling Mom about the party, and worse than that—about the fact that I went to the party to forget

that the major scholarship I had applied for and counted on fell through. So now, with only minor monetary gifts, I'm in financial free fall—no safety net and terrified that everything I've worked toward for twelve years will be for nothing. We can't afford college, so if there are no scholarships or grants, I might as well put feathers in my hair like Brynn.

This time last year, we weren't on our way to our new home. My whole life we'd only lived in tiny apartments. But now, since Dad was promoted to supervisor at the electric company, we're blocks away from the new place we call home. And yet, I have a stomach twisted in so many knots, home is the last place I want to be.

We have to be the only family crammed together on a Sunday night, out buying a Christmas tree before Thanksgiving. Dad says it's because of the deal; Mom argues it's so he has an excuse to play Christmas music earlier than socially acceptable.

"It's a young cypress," Dad rambles, "so we've got to make sure it gets two gallons of water in the next forty-eight hours. If someone sees the water is out, refill it as soon as possible," he continues. "If we don't catch it within two hours, it'll start turning brown, dropping needles. And keep an eye on Chomperz. Don't want a repeat of last year's needle-eating obsession. I lost four pair of shoes in that battle."

"We know, Dad," Brynn says. "We do this every year, so you don't have to give us the same speech each time. Any anyway, it's Birdie's job to keep her cat from eating the tree—not mine."

I don't dare comment. It only encourages the little, monster.

She continues without taking a breath. "Did you even notice the guy had a sign next to the trees this year that said 'Meat Goats for Sale'?" she giggles to herself. "Meat goats! Disgusting."

Mom sighs loud enough for everyone to hear; Dad stops

talking. A blaring siren interrupts the station, one of those emergency alerts I hear on the television sometimes. Dad turns the dial down, but we can still hear the announcer report the flash flood warning that's been issued for our county. Even though we live only a few miles from the lot, we're still not home, because of this violent storm we're caught in.

Dad presses his worn leather boot to the gas pedal, gliding and swerving around the highway's dangerous bend through the torrential downpour that's covering the windshield. The wipers swish and sway, shoving pockets of water off our SUV onto the side of the road. I push my face farther out the window into the air. My fingers cling to the Nikon D3300 camera I got for my seventeenth birthday in January. Mom says I owe her one valedictorian speech at the end of the school year, something I've been working toward since I could speak and still, I feel so unprepared. Brynn sees my fingers fidgeting with the flower-printed strap and sharply cocks her head up at me.

"Maybe after you puke, you can take pictures of it like you do with dead animals," she says. "It's seriously messed up." Now that's she's thirteen, and more of an a-hole than ever, I have to refrain from karate chopping her in the throat on a minute-by-minute basis. It would take me only one shot, and she'd be on the floor, choking for air. I know this because I looked it up (and maybe even practiced on my pillow). Chomperz thinks I have a suppressed rage problem, but I tell him it's just an a-hole-Brynn problem. He usually gets me, but we seem to disagree on all things Brynn.

"*You're* seriously messed up—stop looking through my camera!" I shriek.

"Stop being creepy and morbid like Jeffrey Dahmer. He ate people after he killed them, probably took pictures of them first. Are you a brain-eating zombie like Jeffrey Dahmer—a Dahmbie?"

I shoot her the I'm-going-to-kill-you glance, but she just smirks. "Brynn, I mean it. Shut. Up."

"Brynn, I mean it," she repeats. "Shut. Up."

"*Real* mature."

"*Real* mature." She wags her tongue, dares me to pull it straight out of her throat.

I grunt, forcing Mom to spin around from the front passenger seat to look closely at me. "Are you sick?"

The thoughts are piling up in my head, making me flustered. I see them stacking like files I'm separating into categories: Tell, Don't Tell, Kill Brynn, Schoolwork, Random Song Lyrics, and Cat Videos. Brynn's eyes are still on me with a steely focus, instead of the phone she's usually texting on. I don't know who would ever want to talk to her unless they were threatened with execution, but that's on them.

When I don't answer, Mom turns back to the road.

I meet Brynn's deep-set cocoa eyes that are lightened only by the moon. A half-crooked smile lifts from the corner of her metal mouth in a way that tells me she's totally messing with me. Of course she is, because she's Brynn—queen of her own whacked-out universe where she and I can't possibly coexist like normal sisters. That would be too easy.

"You're going to be in so much trouble," she whispers. "I'm telling them their perfect little princess snuck out of the house without permission. It's going to be awesome."

I lean in, grab a fistful of her plaid shirt—*my* shirt she stole—and lower my voice to something from the depths of hell. "I already paid you off, you little brat. If you say *anything* to Mom and Dad before I do, I'll call Jason Sloan and tell him you're on your period.

She rips my hand off and scoffs. "You better not—I'll die!"

"Try me. Let's see . . . this is day . . . four of your cycle. I know things you don't even realize, little sister."

I watch her deflate and know I've won. She backs away and crosses her arms but in this backseat, there's nowhere she can go that's far enough. Her hair brushes up against me when she turns her head, and now I really want to gag. Thanks to puberty, she completely sucks—a stinky, moody narc who wants to catch me doing anything out of character so she can rat me out and be the hero. Mom and Dad's little Birdie Jay doesn't make mistakes. Ever. That, of course, is according to them, not me. Brynn's determined to prove that theory wrong so she can shove it in my face. They won't even think sneaking out to a party is a big deal, but to me it's everything. I don't want them to see me as one of *those* girls—lying, sneaking around—the kind of girl Brynn will, inevitably, be (and kind of already is). And if I pull at one thread, the whole ball will unravel, and the scholarship thing is a really big ball.

“Vroom!” Benny yells, rolling his toy car's wheels against his leg.

“You like your new car?” Mom asks.

“Yeah,” he says—pretty much the extent of his vocabulary.

I look over at him, his unmatched socks pulled high, sparkling cobalt eyes illuminating all of Clifton. He doesn't look as sick as he's been the last couple weeks, and I think *I can't do this*. Things flop in my stomach the closer we get to home.

“I can't believe he's almost two,” Dad says laying his hand on Mom's. Her fingers have swollen to twice the size they used to be—before the baby weight from Benny left her permanently heavy—so she wears her wedding ring around her neck instead of her finger.

“Can't believe I'm a forty-three-year-old mother of three with the youngest still in diapers,” she says. “Not what I had planned all those years ago in undergrad. I should be a best-selling author, teaching English at a major university, not

ghostwriting in my pajamas while balancing a sippy cup and a pack of wipes.”

“You’ve got to let it go, Bess,” Dad says. His salt-and-pepper hair—that’s more salt than pepper lately—reflects against the moonlight. “You *chose* to stay home, and you’re great at it.”

“I didn’t mean—never mind,” she says, mumbling. “Things are just different than I imagined. That’s all.”

“So goes life,” Dad says.

She turns her attention out the window while a long strand of her coarse brown hair unravels from her fingertip. Thunder clashes, scaring Dad just outside of the thick yellow lines, where the water builds and carries along this winding highway—the one we live on. When he tries to regain control, his white knuckles clutching the wheel, he overcorrects and crosses the double center lines around the bend just as an oncoming vehicle is directly in front of us.

The car swerves, howling a *HONK* to show us what idiots we are, but they never slow their speed—something we’ve realized is the dangerous norm on this stretch of road. Dad eases up on the gas so the rain puddles on the hood. I see his shoulders rise and fall in a sharp, panting motion, and my heart jumps. My breath shortens, my chest is tight, and I can feel my hands clenching shut tight like his. Brynn and I give this look to each other, as if to say, *That was close!* But no one says a word aloud for a solid ten seconds.

“I wish people would slow down on this damn curve,” he says, shaking.

As we approach our driveway, I know it’s ours by the raised wooden stake with the fresh *SOLD* sign on the corner that wasn’t there last weekend.

Mom places her hand on Dad’s shoulder. “I’ll drive next time.”

He nods with intermittent breaths. Brynn looks to me again. She’s a hot branding iron and I’m the animal hide.

Together, we're a violent stampede waiting to happen. All of this combined gives me mixed sensations. I'm cold, with a sweat that drenches my cheeks and I'm hot, with a chill that runs from my toes to my spine in one swift flash. Dad steers up the steep, newly paved driveway that overlooks a string of memorial crosses on the other side of the highway. This part of the road is known as the Devil's Backbone. It's nearly impossible to reverse or check the mail without a car pulling skin off the bone. To be honest, I don't know why anyone would build a house here, but Dad says he got a great deal—just like the cypress—and it's better than the small confines of that apartment where *everyone* could smell Brynn's hair.

I see in the rearview mirror Dad is struggling to find the path of the beastly hill. He punches the garage door opener, but per the new-house kinks we've noted, it stalls. His aggravation is mounting, probably over Mom's underhanded jabs at everything he's doing wrong muttered beneath her breath, but the thing won't budge.

"Piece of shit," he mumbles.

Brynn chuckles. "Dad said *shit*," she whispers.

"Brooks!" Mom says in a huff. "Language." It's the same thing she always says when Dad curses, which happens often.

He pulls the opener from the visor and bangs it on the steering wheel. *Tap tap tap*. One final press, and a light beams onto the lot, making it look like we're at the top of a majestic mountain instead of a puny hill. "Just needed to shake the batteries loose."

He parks the car and looks back at the three of us. "Me and Brynn are on grocery duty, Mom's on Benny patrol, I'll have Sarge help with the tree, and, Birds—you okay?"

I nod, I think. It feels like my head is moving. Everyone is staring at me like it's not, so I decide now would be a good

time to actually speak. “I wish everyone would stop asking me that. I’m fine.”

He looks to Mom, and they make these faces at each other like I’ve said something crazy. “Hope you’re not catching whatever Benny’s been fighting.”

We maintain eye contact. “Grab Benny’s stroller from the trunk,” he orders. He presses the garage door opener again, but the door doesn’t close. With a screech, he pounds the plastic opener on the wheel again.

“Birdie—did you hear Dad?” Mom asks.

I nod again. This time it seems like my head is moving, because the doors swing open and everyone goes on with their tasks. Mom is rustling around in her giant purse while Dad and Brynn grab armfuls of grocery bags. Brynn sticks out her tongue before running inside the connected door that leads to the kitchen and I secretly hope she’ll trip and fall. *Now is the time*, I think. *There is no other time.*

Mom slides out of her side, fast. “Mom,” I say once out of my seat. I sling the camera over my shoulder and compose myself. She’s busy unfastening Benny, the strap strangling her arm as she lifts him, which causes his toy to fall to the ground.

“My car!” he cries.

I inch my way closer to her. “Mom,” I repeat with more urgency.

“I’ll get it, Benny,” she says, setting him down. “Grab the stroller, Birdie.” I hear a slight irritation in her tone.

I reluctantly pull the flimsy thing out of the trunk and, without thinking, something I’m *not* known for, unfold the hinges and prop the wheels against the opening of the garage. The rain is blowing inside in gusts as Mom kneels down onto the oil-tattooed garage floor to look under the vehicle.

“Mom,” I say, walking up behind her. Through the entranceway, I see Dad and Brynn putting the groceries away

while Benny stands here with us. He's rolling the wheels of the stroller between his fingers, ignoring the wetness of rain on his head.

"Go inside, Benny," Mom says. "I'll bring it in when I find it." She's reaching, patting the floor, mumbling something about how lazy Dad is and how she has to do everything around here and though Dad works a lot, she's not completely wrong.

"I need to talk to you," I say. My knees threaten to buckle and leave me with no solid foundation.

"Gotcha!" she says.

"What?" I think my bones have split apart now. One by one, they've unhinged and flung to the outside of me. She already knows what I'm going to say, and she's been waiting, holding it in, until we were alone. A flush of heat tingles across my face.

"His car. Found it."

"Mom, please stop moving," I say, my voice quivering.

"What?" she asks. Her arms are spread wide, daring me to spill every word.

I open my mouth, but the space is void of any truths. The only sounds are of the bellowing winds and rain colliding, blowing streams into us. Through my grunting and stuttering, my grandpa, Sarge, interrupts, his glasses reflecting against the florescent lights.

"Hurry up, Birds," he says, tossing back a popcorn kernel. "*Law and Order: SVU* is on in five. It's the one where Benson is kidnapped." He lingers in the doorway with a grin, then tips his camouflaged veteran hat before he disappears.

"You heard him," she says with her hands pinching at her waist. "Spit it out."

My hands are twisted behind my back while my feet shuffle a nervous number. It doesn't feel like enough time; I can't do this. I have, what—ten seconds to tell her I lost my

scholarship *and* snuck out of the house to blow off steam? She won't understand. "I have something to tell you."

"Birdie Jay?" She crosses her arms, and sudden worry drenches her expression. She leans in close enough for me to smell her perfume, the floral one with a hint of peaches, and it makes me remember all the times I confessed things as a kid.

"So," she says. Her silence is deafening, and now I know why Dad feels the need to talk incessantly when he has nothing to say.

Again, I open my mouth, ready to tell her everything, but we're interrupted by a loud banging that originates from the big bay window at the front of the house. And through the entranceway that connects to the kitchen, there are screams. Loud, guttural screams. Mom and I both turn around at the same time to see why the banging, the screams, are echoing louder than the storm itself at a pitch most animals couldn't recognize.

I'll never forget the look on her face.

Her eyes expand to the size of planets, mouth slack in silent horror. She pushes past me and runs like hell after the stroller Benny climbed into, while I distracted her with my stupid, irrelevant news that now seems so unimportant.

The wind and spitting rain pulls at the metal and plastic, forces him down our steep blackened driveway that tips toward Highway 22 like a teetering roller coaster at its peak—the stroller I pulled from the trunk and left propped open. And this series of motions I will never forget, because this is the last time I will ever know myself, my life, in every sense of the word, again.

Brynn continues pounding on the window's glass with her screams, chasing away every last bit of hope that maybe Mom will catch him, it'll be fine, the storm will slow the cars along the bend this time. Dad runs through the entranceway after Mom, and now they're both chasing Benny, in this

runaway stroller, down this summit. I look through the door that leads inside our house that still smells like fresh paint, and Sarge is rushing around like he's fighting a battle he can't win. And I'm just here, frozen. My feet are concrete, cemented into the earth that is about to split into uneven halves.

There are moments in life, vivid ones splashed onto blank canvas, that hang in front of you, swing like a pendulum you can't grasp. But you reach, eyes wide open, because if you close them, everything changes. So fast. My fingers are outstretched at Mom and Dad's shadows like if I push them far enough, they'll pluck Benny right off the stroller just in time.

Two headlights appear around the bend at an accelerated speed. The engine's roar is louder than any I've heard around these parts. The way the tires squeal, pushing through heaps of stagnant flood water, I'm reminded of a jet landing on a runway at approximately 870 kilometers per hour—a reverberating sound I can't wrap my senses around, even though I'm right here witnessing it.

The lights don't slow through the storm, they speed up, challenge the thunder and crackling lightning that spills from the clouds. The collision is inevitable, and just as the earth is cut into halves, my heart splinters, too, into an endless chasm, created the moment those two headlights catch the stroller and fling my baby brother into the air like a ragdoll. The impact crushes the plastic and metal between the wheels, leaving the fabric in shreds and Benny's motionless body next to the SOLD sign at the base of the hill.

The tires don't screech to a stop, and there is no driver checking to see if my brother's heart is still beating. The last thing I hear is Mom's transcendent wail that seeps into the sky and carries through the whole state of Indiana.

And still, my limbs betray me.

"Move!" Brynn cries, pushing past.

Here I am, this solid mass of cancer, infecting the family—like we’re not already struggling—and my voice refuses to cry out while my feet don’t carry me to the point of impact. Sarge and Brynn run down the slope to where this is happening—it’s really happening—and I can’t make any part of me stir. My brain tells my feet to take a step, just one step, and all these files I’ve categorized in my mind have been hurled in all directions. There is no order inside of me right now—only chaos. I can’t see past the top of the drive. Is he dead, alive? I hate myself for not knowing, for not checking.

A sour stream of food shoots up my throat like a cannon, spewing all over my camera and strap. I don’t hunch over or look for a trash can. I puke, right here, on the cold garage floor where the lighting acts as a sunlamp, heating my scalp. Just as it happens, Chomperz casually strolls through the entranceway with a sort of cat smile, if there is one, and rubs up against my leg because cats are inconsiderate jerks who want to be petted at the absolute worst times. And all this is happening because I wanted to tell Mom something so insignificant, so trivial, before Brynn did.

And just as I think it, the boy at the party flashes through my mind.

And at the absolute worst time, I sort of smile, too.

LESSON OF THE DAY: For a reaction to happen, particles must collide with energies equal to or greater than the activation energy for the reaction. But the thing is, the one thing I can’t stop thinking about: Out of all the cars in the world traveling at normal speeds, why, at the exact moment Benny crossed the highway, was this car there? One second faster or slower, one variable changed, and this might not have happened.

Or maybe, no matter what, it would have.