

Hey

Mom's car smells like artificial pine. For as long as I can remember a green scented tree has hung from her review mirror, the kind that come in a pack of two for \$3.99 at Canadian Tire. My hand grips the passenger door handle as the tree swings back and forth.

"Do you think people will look at you less?" Mom reaches over from the driver's seat and grabs a handful of my hair. "Is it longer on this side? Honestly."

I close my eyes as we rumble over the train tracks, but it doesn't stop the onslaught of images. Grabby hands, torn clothes, flashing lights. I throw up my breakfast burrito. Chunks of ham and egg tell me my fortune from the car floor. "Sorry."

"Group will be good for you." Mom rubs my back. "Talking to people helped me a lot."

"I hate people."

Mom pulls up to a small church; the faded brick sheds red crust around the edges. "You can't spend your life hating the world for a few people's actions."

"They killed Charlie and raped me, Mom." I scramble out of the car, and slam the door.

She rolls down the passenger window. "Your brother—"

"I will *never* forget like you." I hurry through the open side door. A sign on the wall in front of me reads *Trauma Victim Meeting* with an arrow pointing down the hall to my right. Two more signs direct me around a corner to a closed door near the back. Muffled voices drift through from the other side. My hand hovers over the door handle.

"Are you going in?"

I spin around. A young man with dirty blonde hair and dark blue eyes stands beside me. “I-I don’t know.” Three long gashes dress his right cheek from ear to chin.

“I like to tell people I saved a little girl from a lion.”

“I didn’t—I mean, I wasn’t...”

He reaches passed me and opens the door. “It’s a lot less scary if you imagine everyone in pink tutus. I’m Ezekiel, by the way.”

I take a seat in one of the eight chairs that sit in the middle of the room. A group of people stand beside a table with their choice of coffee, tea or juice. Scribbled pictures and cut outs of biblical stories line the walls.

“Hey, I’m Rita.” Her striped stockings disappear into bright purple Doc Martin’s. Scars cover her entire forearm.

“Anna.” My fingers find a piece of fluff on my jeans.

“I have a cousin named Anna. She’s got blonde hair though, kind of uppity, if you know what I mean.” Rita sits in the chair to my left. “Real stickler about which red lipstick matches her purse, but I bet you’re real nice.”

I tug on a loose thread in my jeans. “I guess so.”

“Anyways, it’s always nice having new people. You see the old geezer there? That’s Peter, if he bothers you just let me know. He thinks he’s so funny, but he tells the worst jokes. Like, actually. And that other girl is Cindy, she’s pretty cool, she’s got two young kids she brings sometimes. Three and five years old. Adorable.”

I nod, and loop the thread around my finger several times.

“I see you came in with Izzy, do you know him? I think he’s been coming here the longest.

Word is him and Jerome were best friends when they were younger and that’s why they started this group. You know, to help people and such. But I dunno for sure. You should ask him for me.”

I breathe deep when group starts. We go around the circle and introduce ourselves. Peter sits beside Rita, then James, Theo, and Cindy. Ezekiel sits to my right and Jerome beside him. At the age of ten, Jerome’s mother set the house on fire with him inside. Burn scars cover half his body. Everyone stares when he introduces me.

I pick at the plastic on my chair. I want to be sick. I bite back the urge to cry. My heart rate picks up; turning to ash seems like the better option; my stomach twists around itself; my chest constricts. My lungs claw for air.

“Breathe,” Ezekiel whispers beside me.

And I do. My lungs expand; my heart slows down. I’m in the rigid plastic chair, and Jerome speaks.

“—anyone like to share something about their week?”

“I have a story,” Ezekiel says.

My eyes wander to Ezekiel against my better judgement.

“The floor is yours Izzy,” Jerome replies.

“A new kid joined my daycare class this week, Malachai, and you know how kids are. They’ll ask you pretty much anything. Usually I make something up, but this kid was smart, so I told him the truth, and he told his mom.” Ezekiel pauses.

“W-what happened?” I say it before I can stop myself. Our eyes meet, and I turn my attention to the loose plastic on my chair.

“I got called into the office. ‘Not appropriate for children’ I was told. It’s not like I went into detail.”

Everyone nods along with the story.

“How did it make you feel?” Jerome says.

“I guess it bothered me how society prefers my lie. Like if I don’t say what really happened they can continue to pretend the scars on my face don’t exist.”

Rita and Peter both share stories as well, but I’m stuck staring at the floor and the clock. My foot bounces as I wait for the hand to hit five-thirty. I hate how everything Ezekiel says resonates with me. I don’t remember the last time we talked about Charlie. We never talk about what happened, or why he died, or how it’s my fault.

Ezekiel’s foot nudges my chair, and I look around the circle.

Jerome looks at me. “Don’t feel obligated to share. It’s only if you want.”

I shake my head.

“I’ll see everyone next week then. All you coffee addicts better finish that brown sludge before you leave.”

People laugh at his comment, but I’m halfway to the door by then.

Ezekiel catches me near the exit. “Will you be here next week?”

“Yes,” I say and scurry outside.

Mom waves out her car window.

I steal a glance back at the building.

“So? How was it?”

Her green eyes reflect the afternoon sun, and I stop before I say something like ‘terrible.’ “It was fine.”

No Frills blurs passed and I close my eyes as we cross the train tracks. Ezekiel’s words run circles around my head.

“Bridge club starts next week, but I can tell the girls I’ll be a little late if you want to go again.” Her hands grip the steering wheel, and light curls bounce around her shoulders when she glances at me.

“Sure, Mom.”

“Great!” She turns down McNaughton Rd, and stops in front of house number 88. “I’ll see you same time next week.”

I nod before getting out and head up the porch steps.

I spend the week knitting new hat designs for my Etsy shop, clean the house no less than three times, and work on a few articles for an online blog. By the time Monday rolls around I’m more zombie than human. Mom picks me up at four thirty. This goes on for three weeks. By week four I pace back and forth in the living room. A loud grumbling rises from my stomach, but a lump lodges in my throat at the thought of food. A car horn blares, and I freeze. A door slams, footsteps up the porch steps, jangling keys in the lock.

Mom’s head pokes around the corner. “Anna?”

I curl up in my afghan on the chair in the living room. “I can’t go this week.”

“I’m already late for bridge.”

“I’m sick.” I will the door to shut behind her.

“We do this every week, Anna.” Mom gathers up the afghan and drapes it over the back of the couch. “Put your shoes on, and get in the car.”

“I really can’t go this week though.”

“How’s this week any different from last week?”

“Last week you didn’t have Bridge club.”

Mom drags me from the chair and stands me in front of the door. “You crossed it last week, sweetheart. I know you can do it again.”

I push into her and shake my head. “Please, Mom, I can’t.”

She rubs soothing circles along my back, and nudges me forward. “I’m sure there’ll be people around.”

I rebel against the door frame. “49% of women are sexually assaulted in broad daylight.”

“Ask someone to sit with you until I get there.”

“83% of women are assaulted by someone they know.”

“You’re not a statistic.”

“Six months for what he did.” I clench my teeth and dig my nails into my palms. “It’s not safe out there.”

Mom pushes me until my feet hit the wooden porch. “You can’t live in fear the rest of your life.” She locks the door and leads me to the car. “Here.” She shoves an ice cream bucket in my lap.

I dry heave into it as we roll out of the driveway. “Take me to Bridge club instead.”

Mom rolls down her window. “You’ll be fine.”

I grip the door until my fingers go numb. Sometimes I feel like Mom and I could get along, but then she speaks, and it becomes a passing fancy. I place the bucket at my feet when we pull into the parking lot, and wonder if she'll ever think to pack a toothbrush with the bucket.

"Please."

"I'll try and be here at six-thirty."

Mom has Bridge club every second Monday during the summer, and she missed the first one to bring me here. I know she needs a life, but it feels like a ploy to keep me out of the house for an extra hour. The brick building looms over us. Maybe the bathrooms are nice. "I guess I don't have a choice."

She waves out the window as she drives off.

I slump up the stairs, through the doors, to the classroom. Rita waves when she sees me. I smile awkwardly, and avoid eye contact with everyone.

Ezekiel takes his regular seat beside me. "You're still coming."

"Apparently."

The meeting starts before I'm forced to talk more.

Rita shares a happy story this week. "My co-worker, Terry, got engaged over the weekend. We're having a big party for her at work, and I'm on the planning committee. It's been so much fun designing cakes, and shopping for decorations with Lucy..."

At eighteen Rita was diagnosed with major depressive disorder. She's tried to commit suicide four times since she was sixteen. She's twenty-seven now.

"...Ever since starting these new meds the world's more vibrant, you know? Like, I feel so fortunate to share in Terry's happiness, and celebrate the new life she's starting."

Rita keeps a journal where she writes down all the positive things that happen in her day.

I make an honest effort to pay more attention to everyone, but my eyes still wander to the clock. A whole hour. I flick at my wrist. Sixty minutes. My heel bounces up and down. Three thousand six hundred seconds.

“Are you visiting this week?”

I jump and my eyes drift from empty chair, to empty chair.

Ezekiel drinks from a Styrofoam cup. “Rita’s grown a liking to you. Says you’re a good listener. I don’t know if I believe her myself. I mean, is someone a good listener by default if they don’t speak?”

I need to call Mom, tell her I’m walking. Home can’t be that far. I tap my fingers together; my nails clack when they hit each other. “Is there a phone here I can use?”

Ezekiel grabs a cell phone from his pocket. “You can use mine.”

I take it somewhat reluctantly, and push the only button I see. A group of small children stare at me, faces twisted in all kinds of goofy expressions. *Slide to unlock* shimmers at the bottom of the screen. Before I can figure out what it means, the screen goes black. Is his phone broken? I hold it out to him. “I changed my mind.”

“I can look up the number if you don’t remember it,” he offers.

Heat creeps down my neck. “I don’t know how to use it—the phone.”

“It’s really easy.” He pushes the button, and slides his finger across the screen. Various icons glide into view. “You want this app here.” He hands it back, and points to a green icon with a white receiver that says *Phone* underneath.

It's a touch screen. I'm an idiot. "Of course, right." I hit the button with my finger and a list of contacts pops up. I push the keypad option and dial Mom's number.

"Hello?"

"Mom?"

"Anna? What's wrong, did something happen? Are you okay?" I hear a chair slide, and she excuses herself from the table.

I turn away from Ezekiel, and whisper into the phone. "I'm fine. I—" What if she doesn't let me walk? "—have another way home, so you don't have to pick me up."

"A friend?"

I hear the apprehensiveness in her voice, and look at Ezekiel. "I'm borrowing someone's phone, so I have to go. I'll see you Sunday." I hand the phone back to Ezekiel, say, "Thank you," and head for the door.

"Is everything okay? You seem more antsy than usual."

"I just need to go home." I step outside and am hit by the humidity. When did it get so hot?

"Do you need a ride?"

"No." That's a lie. "Yes." What are you doing? "It's fine. I can walk."

"Your mom usually picks you up, right?"

I turn at the bottom of the stairs, and hold my arm out. "Too close."

Ezekiel steps up two stairs. "I can give you a ride if you don't have one."

"I barely know you. I'm not telling you where I live."

“My last name is Cole, I grew up on 2 Moon Drive, and I work at Little Rabbits Daycare on 5th Ave. You can call them if you want to check my credentials.” He holds his phone out to me.

“The number is programmed in my contacts.”

I narrow my eyes at him. Is he joking? He looks serious. I grab the phone, and scroll through his contacts. It’s there. Little Rabbits Daycare. I hand the phone back without calling. They’d be closed now anyway. “Do you have a bucket?”

His eyebrows furrow. “What?”

“A bucket, in your car, do you have one.”

“No?”

“How about a towel.”

“Nope.” He shakes his head. “Why?”

“Nevermind, I’ll just use my cardigan.”

He looks from me to the parking lot. “Can I come down the rest of the stairs?”

“I guess so.”

“My car’s this way.”

He leads me to a faded blue pinto. It looks like someone threw a bowling ball at the passenger door which creaks when I open it. “It’s safe?”

He laughs. “What’re you saying about my car?”

“You should get a new one.”

“You don’t mince words.” He puts the key in the ignition, and the car sputters to life.

I pull my seatbelt as tight as it’ll go, and lay my cardigan on my lap. “Are you sure it’s not dying?”

“I promise to get you home, but you have to tell me where it is.”

“88 McNaughton Road. It’s past the No Frills, by the train tracks.”

“That’s all the way on the other side of town.”

“Walking is better than waiting on those steps for a car ride.”

He exits the parking lot, and takes a left on Tybalt. “You get car sick?”

I roll down the window, and close my eyes. “I get everything sick.”

“It’s great you still manage to get to group every week.”

Warm air burns my lungs. “I only go because my mom threatened me if I didn’t.” I focus on the wind. Uneven strands of hair tickle my forehead. We breeze through the light evening traffic. When the car slows, I open my eyes and see the house. From this side Ezekiel’s scars run from cheekbone to chiseled jaw like three beacons. He must have been beautiful once.

“Your house?” he says.

“Charlie’s house.”

“Charlie won’t beat me up for driving you home, will he?”

“Charlie is dead.”

Ezekiel’s hand slips from the steering wheel. “I’m sorry.”

I get out of the car when he looks at me. My cardigan falls to the ground, and I stare at it for several seconds. Ezekiel watches me, but I don’t look at him. I can’t say anything.

“Anna—”

I pick up my cardigan and run for the house, bolt the door and curl to my knees. I shrink so small, and disappear so completely that I don’t move until a sliver of light hits my eyes. I crawl to my room, and bury myself in the pillows and blankets on my floor.

~

I don't hear her come in.

"Anna?" she calls.

Is it Sunday already? It can't be.

"Anna?"

The bedroom door opens. I don't move. Maybe she—

"Anna Marie how long have you been under there?"

Blankets are torn off me.

"It's three in the afternoon." Mom stands with her hands on her hips. "Your hair is disgusting."

"Did you come all this way just to insult me?"

Mom rolls her eyes. "You're twenty-one years old."

I look away. I don't want to be lectured by her.

She turns the shower on and comes to stand in the doorway, but I still don't move from the floor. We stare each other down. I know what comes next, but I can't will myself to move

Mom drags me to the bathroom, strips me down, and sits me in the bathtub. Cold water hits my skin, probably on purpose, and I shiver. Mom dumps shampoo on my head, and tugs at my hair as she scrubs it all in.

"I hate you," I say.

"Doesn't hating everyone get tiring?" She dunks my head in the water. She thinks I don't see the pain my words cause her, but I do.

I slump against the tile. By the time she turns off the water we are both soaking wet. When I'm changed we sit in the living room and drink tea.

"Your father will be out with the car tomorrow. Can your friend take you to group?"

I stare at the picture of Grumpy Cat on my mug. *NOPE* is written at the top. Is there such a word with my mother? *NOPE*, it stares back. "I guess so."

She takes a breath. "You know your father, never tells me anything until the last minute, and I know you won't go on your own."

I hide my face by taking a long swig of tea. "It smells bad."

"Now don't start," she huffs. "How can you sit in here with all the doors and windows closed?"

"It smells bad."

We finish our tea in silence, and mom brings the empty mugs to the kitchen.

"See you next week," I say.

"I look forward to hearing all about group."

From the window, I watch the car leave. The next day I plug my phone into the wall, and look up Little Rabbits Daycare in the phone book.

"Little Rabbits Daycare, how may I help you?"

I swallow. "Does—Does Ezekiel Cole work there?"

"One moment please."

Tinkling xylophone music replaces the background noise. Why does hold music all sound exactly the same? Is there a singular track that all businesses use?

"Hi, Ezekiel's just stepped out for lunch, may I take a message?"

My heart sinks. “No. Don’t tell him I called.” I hang up the phone and unplug it from the wall.

I schedule a UPS pick up for two toques that sold, and spend the week knitting three more.

When Mom visits on Sunday, I lie about going to group. It rolls off my tongue, who shared, and about what. She’s too excited to notice none of it happened. Before I can lament her forcibly driving me tomorrow, she says the car’s not working.

“It just started stalling. It happened twice on the way here. I have an appointment to bring it in tomorrow, but I don’t know if it’ll be fixed in time.”

I try to hide my elation with a sigh. “I guess I can ask again.”

“You’re sure it’s fine? Doris is already picking me up for Bridge club.”

I narrow my eyes at her, but she gives me the same smile she always does. “I’ll call and ask tomorrow.”

“I’m so proud of you, Anna.”

I swirl the tea leaves at the bottom of my mug. “I have an article to finish for the blog tonight, so I should probably—”

“Oh, of course. Don’t let me keep you.” She puts her mug down on the table and grabs her purse. “I’ll just see you next week.”

I gather the dishes she left in the living room. She’s never forgotten the dishes before.

The next day I sit at the kitchen table and stare down the phone. My eyes drift to the front door. I pick up the receiver and call Little Rabbits Daycare. The receptionist answers again. I loop the phone cord around my finger. “Is Ezekiel there?”

“Hang on.” She puts me on hold again.

I pray he takes the same lunch break every day.

“Hello?”

I freeze. It’s him. It’s Ezekiel.

“Anna? Is that you?”

I slam the receiver down and unplug the phone. It takes me three tries my hands shake so badly.

I fish through my dwindling pile of yarn until I find something extra soft. I’ll need to order more. I settle in my big comfy chair in the living room and start a new pair of fingerless gloves. Come September they’re the most popular item in my shop. I’m so focused on my task, I almost miss the knock on my front door some hours later.

I peek through the living room curtains, but the stupid flower pot on the porch railing obscures my view. I swear Mom put it there on purpose. I grab the door handle, and swing it open.

“Hey.” Ezekiel speaks like he’s been coming by every day for weeks, flashing a flippant grin as he flicks hair from his eyes. He wears a black leather jacket and distressed jeans.

I freeze, and he keeps speaking before I can close the door.

“Everybody’s been asking about you at group, wondering why you’re not coming back.”

I cross my arms. “I’m a serial axe murderer.”

“Wouldn’t that involve leaving your house?”

“Why? You’re standing on my porch, aren’t you?”

He grins. “Does that mean I’m invited in?”

“No.” I scowl. “What if you’re a vampire?”

“Serial axe murderers can’t kill vampires?” He places a hand on his chest and breaths a sigh of relief. “Thank god for loopholes.”

“Goodnight Ezekiel.” I close the door.

He comes back the next day.

“Hey,” he says with the same flippant attitude.

I want to scream at him to leave me alone.

“Can I come in?”

“Absolutely not.”

Ezekiel sits in front of me. “Is it because your freezer is full of body parts?”

“Go away.”

I have the door halfway closed when he says, “You’re hair’s growing out.”

I reach for the uneven strands. It’s three inches in some parts now. “Hair does that.” My front lawn is turning yellow. “Why are you here?”

“You called me at work. Twice.”

I flick the door handle. “How do you know it was me?”

“The receptionist said a weird girl called for me.”

“I told her not to tell!”

“It was your mom who asked me to stop by, actually.”

My heart stutters. “W-what?”

“She was ecstatic when I said I was your friend.” His face scrunches and he scratched the back of his head. “I feel a little bad about lying though.”

“You didn’t tell?”

“I guess I’ll have to pick you up next week to give it some truth.”

I nod slowly— “O-okay,” —and close the door.

When I open the door the next day he’s sitting on a lawn chair.

I raise my hand before he can say his stupid ‘hey’. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I spend most of my day sitting on a hard floor helping kids build castles with blocks. This chair is a lot more forgiving.” The middle scar makes his grin lopsided. I refuse to think it’s endearing.

“I could call the cops, you know. This is private property.”

“And miss out on the awesome conversation we’re about to have?”

I grip the door handle. “Why do you keep coming here?”

“Most people’s eyes never leave my face, but you,” —He shakes a finger at me— “you’re different. You *never* look at me.”

I will the flower pot in the corner of the porch to fall over. “Because I want you to leave.”

“It think it’s because we’re the same.”

“We are nothing alike.”

“Just because you lock yourself away doesn’t mean people can’t see your scars, Anna.”

I close the door, and lean my head against the cold wood.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then,” Ezekiel calls from the other side.

I’m not sure which idea I hate more: him coming back, or him finally listening to me when I tell him not to.

But he does come back. Every day. For the whole week.

On Friday he invites me to sit on the porch with him.

“Your porch swing is lonely,” he says, because he’s ridiculous.

“It’s an inanimate object.”

He turns to the swing. “She doesn’t mean that.”

I roll my eyes. “I dislike the sun.”

“What? The sun helps the trees grow.”

I glare at the tree in my front yard. “It gives you cancer.”

“Tap water gives you cancer these days.”

I close the door before I strangle him.

Ezekiel only works half days on Saturdays. I know this because he’s standing on my porch four hours earlier than usual holding a pair of pink, heart shaped sunglasses. “Emma, one of the girls in my daycare class, was complaining about the sun today, so I mentioned how you wouldn’t sit on the porch with me because it also bothered your eyes, and she told me I could borrow them. If I tell her you wouldn’t accept them she’ll be really upset.”

I grab the stupid sunglasses, and stalk over to the porch swing.

“Aren’t you going to wear them?”

I put them down beside me, and cross my arms. “They’re too small.”

He picks them up, and places them on my face. His lip twitches.

“If you laugh I will cook you into meat pies.”

He sits down beside me. “I liked that movie.”

I glare at him.

“Sweeny Todd.”

I trace the outline of the tree in the yard. The sunglasses help, but I'll never tell him. "I don't want to go to group on Monday."

Ezekiel rocks the swing. "If it weren't for group you'd never leave the house."

"If I promise to sit on the porch swing with you, will you make an exception just this once?"

"Are you inviting me over on Monday?"

"No. I'm just saying if you show up at my door—like you've been doing for the last six days—maybe I'd be willing to sit on the porch swing with you again."

"Do you promise to go the Monday after?"

"I don't make promises I can't keep."

"Then keep it."

I fidget with the cushion. "It's not that simple."

"Sure it is."

"No. It isn't."

"Then I'll see you Monday." Ezekiel gets up, and walks across the porch.

I scramble off the swing. "Wait!" He's halfway down the step when I cut him off, and I raise my hands to his chest to stop him. "Please, wait." I can feel his warmth just beneath my fingertips. Is he always this warm?

Ezekiel doesn't move.

"I—I concede. I'll go the Monday after. Just, don't be mad."

"I'm not mad."

"You're not?"

He shakes his head. "Rita asks Jerome about you every week. Do you know why?"

How am I supposed to know that? “Why?”

“Because she’s worried about you.”

My hands drop.

“You’re one of us now whether you like it or not.”

“I am?”

“I’ll see you Monday.” My expression must be worrisome because he adds, “After group.”

His boots clunk down the steps.

The porch swing sways back and forth as I retake my seat.

I knit for the rest of the day. I can’t concentrate on anything. We never made plans before. Knowing he is *definitely* coming Monday fills me with more nervous energy than I can deal with. I barely eat. I knit myself into a frenzy and add the gloves to my shop at 2AM Sunday morning.

I can’t remember a single thing Mom talks about when she visits. I tell her the truth about group. She wants to be upset, but can’t because of Ezekiel. Instead, she thanks me for being honest, and leaves. I’ve entered the Twilight Zone.

Monday is the worst day of all. I order more yarn off Amazon. I start a book, put it down, pick it up again, replace it on the bookshelf. I pace around the living room, walk to the front door, sit in my chair, open the door close the door, open it again. I sit on the floor and stare down the metal divider separating the tile entryway from the wooden porch. What’s so special about it? Why do I hate crossing it?

I get angry at it. I go to the kitchen, grab my cleaning supplies, and walk over the stupid metal thing, and then I scrub the porch swing until it sparkles in the sun. I bring the cushions

inside, strip the fabric, and put it all in the washing machine. I watch through the glass as the water and soap swishes around inside.

My energy fades around four o'clock, and the self-doubt sets in. What if he doesn't come? What if he does come? What are they saying at group? Did Ezekiel tell them he'd come to see me? A ball forms in the pit of my stomach. I run to the bathroom; I almost don't make it. I brush my teeth.

I look out the window when a car drives by; it's only five, too early still. I open the door, and stare at the metal plate again. "I will cross you," I tell it. "I will." I kick it. Pain shoots up my toe and down my foot. I curse, and I yell at it. I sit down on the tile, and glare at its stupid, shiny reflective surface. I don't hear the car. I don't hear him walk up the steps. I don't hear anything until I'm staring at his black boots on my porch.

"Hey," Ezekiel says, because why break with tradition now?

I crane my neck to look up at him.

"Should I ask why you're sitting on the floor?"

I get to my feet, and trip on my way out the door.

Ezekiel catches me. "Are you alright?"

I hate Karma. "It's because I kicked it."

He looks confused. "Kicked what?"

I point at it. "The metal divider. I kicked it, because I hate it, and now it made me trip."

"Shame on you."

At first I think he's talking to me, but then I realize he's glaring at the metal divider. I laugh at the ridiculousness of it all.

“You’ve never laughed before.”

I look up at him. We’re very close, and his breath tickles my hair. I push away, and sit in the far corner of the swing. “It’s because you’re ridiculous.” He tries to sit beside me, but I put my arm out and say, “Too close,” so he sits in the other corner.

Ezekiel rocks the swing, and we sit in silence.

“How was group?” I ask after a while.

“Rita wants to show you pictures of the cake they got for Terry.”

I nod. “And everyone else?”

“Is excited to see you.”

The glare from the porch swing pierces my eyes, and I’m forced to close them. “The sun is too bright.”

“I anticipated as much.”

I open my eyes when he slides a pair of sunglasses on my face. “They aren’t heart shaped.”

“I had to give the other ones back.”

“You really took a little girl’s sunglasses?”

“She said they had magical powers to help people see in the sun.” I arch my eyebrows, and he raises his hands in defense. “She wouldn’t take no for an answer, okay?”

Neither of us says anything after that. The sun dips behind the tree.

I glance at him from the corner of my eye. His scars sing from this angle. “Ezekiel, what happened to your face?”

It’s so long before he speaks, I begin to think he won’t answer. “My father tried to gouge my eyes out with a butcher knife.”

“He missed.” It comes out before I can stop myself.

Peals of laughter erupt from him.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

He raises a hand. “Don’t apologize. That’s the most honest response I’ve received in the nine years since it’s happened.” He takes a deep breath, and looks over at me. “You’re right. He did miss.”

“Why?”

He leans his head back on the swing. “I was sixteen.”

I look at him; really look at him, even though I’m terrified when our eyes meet, because there’s understanding in them. I reach out, and trace the scars with my fingertips.

His whole body stills.

He *is* beautiful. The scars make him that way. Am I the same?

“You are.”

I spoke out loud without meaning to. “I wasn’t supposed to say that.”

“Which part?”

“I said it all?”

“You did.”

I bury my face in my hands. “Can you forget what I said?”

“I can leave quietly if you’re really embarrassed.”

I’m irritated by the hint of amusement in his voice. “Please.”

“Please leave, or please forget?”

“Both.”

I look up when the swing stops moving.

He stops halfway down the porch steps to look back.

Word Count: 5,756