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An Entangled Friendship

I walked the steps to my new high school and anxiety churned in my stomach with each step. I was a tad early and only a few students were outside. Some were reading books and others were chatting amongst themselves on the benches under the huge oak trees. I stopped walking and ingested all of my surroundings. Big letters on top of the brick building spelt out Fairfield High Preparatory School. The ugly yellow buses started filing into the bus port. Homeroom must be starting soon. I heard a light chirping from birds and in the sky was a murder of crows soaring through the foggy clouds. The students that were talking under the oak trees began to stare at my stiff body. They exchanged nervous laughter. I needed to get inside. I zipped up my gray hooded jacket and lifted the hood over my shaggy brown hair. I stuffed my hands in my pockets and walked into school with my head down.

I finally lifted my head as my back foot made its way over the silver metal threshold. The bright fluorescent lights illuminated four hallways. From left to right the hallways were labeled: 9th Grade, 10th Grade, 11th Grade, and 12th Grade, and I made my way down the 9th Grade hallway. This hall was painted a light shade of lime green. I slowed down my pace as I walked down the hallway. I peered through the open classrooms and saw some students locating their seats and teachers organizing their wooden desks. The hallway had that bitter new paint smell and my nose crinkled as it adjusted to the stench.

The first round of hard tiles on the floor were the same shade of lime green as the walls, but now some were a baby blue- they must have still been in the process of redecorating. Numerous flyers were clustered onto a bulletin board and many bolded words tried their best to grab my attention, but I only focused on the flyer named Music Club. The flyer said everyone is welcome and there is a meeting after school. My heart fluttered at the idea of making friends in the music club. I hoped there was a spot open for a guitarist.

I continued walking and reached the end of the hallway. I forgot to actually look for my classroom. I pulled out a crinkled sheet of white paper and squinted my eyes to reveal my classroom number: 111. All the doors to the classrooms were shut and I glanced at the knockoff silver Rolex my father gave me two years ago to check the time. It was 8:02 and Homeroom had started. The anxiety from earlier crept its way back into my stomach and my hands began to shake. The thought of everyone staring at me as I walked through the closed door caused fear's claws to rip into my agitated stomach.

The numbers went backwards as I slowly walked by and the fear kept growing. Room 119, 117, 115, and 113 turned into a blur as I passed, and now room 111 clouded my vision. I took the deepest breath I could muster and told myself it wouldn't be like middle school. I was at a completely different school and I would not allow the torture to eat me alive this time. I gave myself a sense of false hope to get myself through the mahogany colored door. I grasped the handle and its iciness stuck to my hand. It took a moment for the chills to go away. The door

swung open and it creaked loudly allowing me to make a grand entrance I did not desire. Each head turned to look at me and the teacher welcomed me with a barely audible hello. I put my head down and took the last seat in the back in the first row. My mind already began to daydream as the morning announcements took place. Each student stood up to state the Pledge of Allegiance, and with my mind thinking of my favorite Led Zeppelin song, "Babe, I'm Gonna Leave You," I was the last to stand. My face grew hot and red when I noticed students peering at me wondering why I was not standing. All I wanted was to hide under my hoodie. However, instead of hiding I held my head high and told myself it would be a good day filled new friends. I forced a crooked smile on my lips. Now was the time to turn my life around, and I intended to do just that. Even if meant taking myself out of my comfort zone. The bell boomed in my ears and interrupted my thoughts. Students grabbed at their bags and swung them around their backs. It was time to find my next class: room 134. I stood up and straightened my posture and found a new confidence I did not know I had. If only that confidence could have lasted the whole day.

The hope of possibly being in the music club was the only reason I did not ditch school. Not one person even gave me a simple hello. Thoughts were racing in my head as I made my way to the room holding the music club. It took me a moment to realize I was balling my fists. I released the tension and noticed my nails left four tiny indentions on my palm.

"I need to calm down," I whispered to myself. My heart was pounding against my chest. I reached room 421 and noticed this door looked like the same as any other in this school. Maybe this club was not as grand as my mind wanted to believe. The ugly blue hallway forced hatred into my mind. I lost my nerve. I put my weight on the back of my heels and spun around and walked away. I put my hood over my head, stuffed my hands in my pockets and kept my eyes facing downward. Then, a sudden block in my path appeared. I was knocked back by an unknown object and I lifted my eyes to see a student. I saw he was carrying a guitar case.

"Oh, man I'm so sorry, are you ok?" The stranger asked. He had light brown eyes that seemed incredibly sincere. He had olive skin and dark brown short hair, almost black. He was tall also, reaching over 6 feet high. He reached out to me and made sure I was not hurt, and I quickly assured him I was fine.

"Are you going to the music club?" I asked him.

"Yeah, I've been in the club for 3 years now, it's great. If you play any instruments you should check it out." His enthusiasm made me smile.

"I uh play guitar also. I'm not too good, but I was thinking of going to the club, but you guys probably wouldn't want me there," I replied.

"You're talking nonsense the club is always looking for new additions, come on I'll walk with you. The room is just a little bit down this hallway," he said as he patted me on the shoulder and urged me to move forward. I hesitated at first, but he stood still and stared at me until I

joined him. I finally put my right foot in front of my left and began walking. On the back of his black jacket was lettering that spelled “Led Zeppelin” with the art from their first album. I opened my mouth to exclaim I liked his jacket, but the words did not come out. Instead he said, “So, how has your first day been? Oh, and I’m Clay by the way, nice to meet you, man.” He held out his hand for me to shake.

“I’m James. My first day has been ok,” I said.

“Well, you’re not a man of too many words, are you?” Clay said while laughing. I did not join in his joke and he cleared his throat awkwardly. “I know you’re probably nervous about the club, but don’t be. I’m the only other guitar player, so you’ll be forced to spend most of your time with me anyhow.”

I smiled up at him and felt like I could be honest with this person. There was a certain way he made me feel comfortable, a way I have not felt in a while.

“Well, I guess my day wasn’t really all that great,” I said. I noticed another hint of new paint smell.

“The first day is always hard, man, but you’ll settle in. You can always talk to me if anything is bothering you. I hate that they repainted all these hallways, they just stunk up the damn place.” I laughed. Clay actually seemed like a nice guy. Maybe we could even be friends. He plays guitar, and electric too, my favorite.

“It felt like everyone was staring at me all day. I’m new here. I was late to homeroom and of course everyone stared me down as if I had committed some sort of crime. Before that, I was checking out the school and people were snickering behind my back, and honestly the only thing that kept me going today was the music club,” I said without taking a break for breath. Silence filled the air as Clay processed all I just said. Within breaks of the silence I heard voices behind room 421.

“Well, you’re talking now aren’t you? I’m sorry that happened, but don’t worry about those kids. Don’t ever care about what people think unless you actually care about them. But, come on, let’s go into the club and talk about this more. I’m eager to learn everything there is to know about our new guitar player.” Clay walked in and held the door open for me. I grew hopeful that this friendship may be a possibility. It felt good talking to someone about my first day. Dad was the only person I could do that with. I actually felt excited about meeting these new people as I walked through the mahogany door and looked upon all the new faces.

After spending the remainder of my time after music club avoiding my house I finally walked up the cobblestone entrance leading to my ugly front green door. There were various stones missing and all that was left were indentions of the lost stones in the dead grass. The front door stood only two feet away now, but I could not make myself grasp the door handle. Instead, I

walked back out into the front yard. The garden gnome I broke when I was five still sat next to the huge oak tree that shaded the majority of our tiny front lawn. I sat down and rested my elbows on my crossed knees next to the gnome and peaked inside, and to my amaze I saw three baby blue birds in a nest. They all loudly chirped for their mother, wanting their next meal, it appeared. I thought back to the music club. Clay and I played so well together. We even both preferred Fenders. Clay promised to invite me over soon so we could play more. I wished I could have expressed to him how much his friendship meant.

After glancing at the baby birds one last time, I picked myself up and wiped the grass clippings off my pants. Deciding I had stalled long enough I walked up the rickety cobblestones once again, but this time entered through the front door. I put my book bag down next to the couch and gazed into the kitchen to see if my mom were anywhere to be found, but I heard none of her usual loud footsteps and came to the conclusion she must be out. At this point I'd usually make a quick dash for my bedroom, but I decided to relax in the living room.

I took out my phone from the pocket of my jeans. I glanced at Clay's contact name and wondered if I should send him a message. Having a friend was so new to me and the last thing I wanted was to push him away. I rested the phone on the arm rest of the couch and tried to ease my excitement. I glanced at my watch and it read 8:04. I told myself I should get up to my room before Mom gets home, but my eyelids grew so heavy. I was completely helpless to the crushing weight of my eyes being closed shut. The creeping darkness slowly cascaded its claws up and down my limp body. Images flooded into my mind and distorted my reality. A scene took place before my eyes.

I looked down at myself in a bathtub. It was me at age 12. I recognized the scene instantly and the heat radiating from the tub forced dizziness into my head. I could hear an argument and I turned around and looked upon the closed door of my bathroom to face the direction of the screams. The younger version of myself cocked his head to the side to listen with me. My parents were screaming at each other. Tears welled into my eyes as the conclusion of this night played over and over in my head. I saw young James and wished I could hold him and warn him about what would be happening in just a few minutes. I kneeled beside the tub. I tried to grab his face, but it was as if I were a ghost in a movie. My hand went right through his face not grasping anything.

The hole my dad tattoos on the wall has not happened yet. It's coming. Sweat rolled down every inch of my body. The heat stuck to me, and the steam suffocated my lungs. My heart pounded at an abnormal rate. Young James covered his ears trying to silence the screams in the room directly next to the bathroom. He began crying.

I screamed, "Get up! Go stop him, go, James!" However, the sounds never escaped my lips. They simply echoed in my head. Young James put his head under the water. The waves bent his face. Tiny bubbles exploded on the surface of the water. I remembered what I was thinking in that exact moment when this dream was a reality. I thought of how peaceful it was under the

water. No screaming parents. Just myself in a peaceful moment I'd never had the luxury of having.

Young James's body began twitching. He was losing oxygen. I suppressed the strong urge to grab his shoulders and try to save him, but I knew he would be fine. A life gets taken tonight, but it's not young James. His body twitched a little less. The water became more still as the bubbles decreased.

A boom echoed in both of our ears. Young James pulled himself up from the water and took the deepest breath of his life. I tried patting him on the shoulder, but again I failed. He coughed up water and was disoriented for another minute or two, I always lose track of time at this part. Young James got out of the water and wrapped a towel around his waist. He wiped his eyes and saw a couple feet above him was a tiny hole on the wall. He cocked his head to the side wondering how it got there. He slowly walked closer to the hole. He closed his left eye and peered through with his right. A blurry version of his parent's room was on the other side. He saw his father on the floor.

"Dad? What are you doing?" he asked, but Dad fell silent. I crouched down into the corner of the bathroom and crumbled into a ball. My cries were so loud I wondered how young James could not hear them. I put my face into the wall so I did not have to see what happened next again. Young James ran out of the bathroom and pounded on my parent's locked door.

"Dad, open the door. Open the door," young James pleaded. My crouched stance fumbled and I fell onto the floor. I covered my face in my sleeves and begged myself to wake up.

"Wake up, James, please. Please, just wake up. I don't want to watch anymore," I screamed. I peeked my eye over the top of my sleeve and the bathroom still clustered my vision. I rested on my elbow and somehow found a way to pick myself up. I walked over to young James and knew he would need me for what was to happen. I got to him just in time to see my mother with bloodshot eyes opening the door.

"Don't even bother coming in. Your father is a fucking loser and he proved it tonight. The police are on their way," she said with her voice cracking every other word. She looked like she had only shed a tear or two, in face she looked emotionless. I gave her a glare with such hatred. Young James had no idea what was going on. He pushed past her. She tried to grab him, but he was too quick. I wished she had grabbed me.

I walked in also. The smear of blood on the blue wall caught my eye first. My father was lying face down on the floor. Red stained the once white carpet. The lack of cleaning turned it into an off-white color. Blood was still trickling from his temple. Young James screamed at him to get up, even though he knew Dad was gone.

The paramedics and officers filed into the room. They lifted up young James and took him away from the scene. He kicked and bit them, but their strength overpowered him.

I looked at my dad's body one last time and whispered, "Bye, Dad."

I woke up to myself sprawled on the couch with sweat rolling down the side of my face. My watch read 12:24. I woke up just in time to see my mom stumbling through the door. She giggled as she tripped over the little carpet in front of the door. I grabbed my phone from the arm rest and got up as quietly from the couch as possible and walked to the stairs, but she turned her head right before I was out of sight.

"Hey, shithead, where are you going?" She asked drunkenly. I did not answer. "Hey, I'm talkin' to you! Where's some damn respect?" She pressed a dark bottle of whiskey to her lips. A couple strings of the whiskey rolled down her chin and stained her white blouse.

"I'm sorry, Mom, I'm going to bed now." I finally made it to the stairs. My hands were balling into fists again. I bit on my bottom lip to stop any hateful words from escaping.

"You know, you're just like your father. Both lazy, stupid, not good for nothin'." She began laughing. I could feel heat flooding into my cheeks. "Now, you come here and come sit with me a minute. I need to talk to you." She put her hands in front of her body to balance herself on her short journey to the couch. She cursed under her breath with every misstep. I put my hood on and walked over to the couch. I sat as far as I could from her. "You remember when you was a little boy? Couldn't of been older than oh four or five? You broke that damn garden gnome?" She had to stop the story to control her laughter. "I was so mad at you. Is it possible you've gotten stupider since then?" She roared a deep laugh.

"Yeah, how could I forget? You hit me so hard in the head Dad had said I was unconscious for a couple minutes," I said and she slapped my cheek.

"You getting smart with me? You deserved that. You broke my beautiful gnome, and it's still sitting out in that shitty yard. And take that stupid hood off."

I gave no intention of taking down my hood. I could feel her staring at me. Instead of facing her I focused on the red light blinking on the television. She grabbed at my shoulders and pulled the jacket completely off of me. She cupped her forehead with her hand. The fast movement made her dizzy. She stood up and opened the drawer of the coffee table next to the couch.

"W-What are you doing?" I asked. A sinister smile curved on her lips as she revealed a pair of scissors. She sliced into the hood and I ran at her to yank it out of her hand, but I was too late. A jagged, deep cut had been made and little gray strings were slumping lifeless from the frayed fabric. I stared agape at the sweater. My one source of comfort was brutally taken away. As I yanked the sweater from her sweaty fingers a tiny object flew across the room.

"Is that what I think it is? I told you to get rid of that." She spat on my face. Silence replaced her echo and I could hear her teeth grinding together. I hid my face so she could not see the puddle of tears forming around my eyes. I bent my knees and located the object on the floor.

It was the charm my father gave me a week before his death. I picked up the cross and folded my fingers around it. I always thought the charm would be safe there after I sewed it into my hood.

To my right a shadow grew taller. A long and narrow silhouette with pointed ends lifted higher than the rest of the shadow. I tightly shut my eyes and more tears rained down my face. I waited for the impact. The silhouette came closer with extreme speed. My mother's hard hand hit the back of my head with such force I fell to the ground. She kicked my back and I realized she must have been wearing her pointed toed boots. The pain entered my back instantly. I grasped my lower back wishing the pain would subside. More kicks came and my cries grew louder with each strike.

"Please stop," I whispered. The blows stopped coming and I heard the couch squeak as she sat on it.

"Get out of my sight," she said and pointed up the stairs to my room. I picked my crumpled body off the floor and refused to look at her. All the anger had seeped out and my body did not know what to feel. My body ached with each move I made. I climbed up the stairs like a dog would, on all fours. Beaten and worthless.

I made it to my room and crawled into my bed. I saw the Led Zeppelin poster on my wall and wished so badly I could be like them. Famous and adored by millions of fans.

My thoughts tangled into a mess in my head. This feeling I had was so different from the other times Mom had hit me. I did not know what to feel. All of my emotions blended into one creating an almost neutral feeling. That was it- I felt nothing. I wiped all the tears off my face and laughed. A quiet laugh that made me feel better. I put my right hand behind my head and stared at my ceiling for the longest time. I stared at the naked bulb of the lamp by my bed. The brightness reminded me of the campfire my father and I once built. I closed my eyes and watched the tiny streak of white light blink in the darkness across my eyes. I thought of nothing, and it felt almost as peaceful as when I was under the water. I pulled out my phone from my pocket and a message was waiting for me from Clay. I sat upright and stood up from my bed. I paced my room as I read it. He invited me to dinner at his house. I wrote back right after reading it to accept his offer. My smile felt like all my teeth were visible and bared.

I decided I would not be returning to my house. Clay treated me better than anyone I've ever met. He would bring me happiness. I planned on sneaking in on a night when Mom is passed out and retrieve all my things. This was the last time she treated me like this. She was not my mother anymore.

I stepped back into bed and turned off the lamp on the floor. I hoped my excitement about the dinner would allow me to sleep.

I met up with Clay after school ended. He offered to drive me to his house. I climbed into the passenger seat of his silver Ford Taurus and an overwhelming number of empty bottles were scattered on the floor. I laughed and gestured to them.

“Yeah, sorry about that. I’m not exactly the most organized person, but you can get over it,” he laughed.

He turned on the car and started backing out of his parking spot, number 54. He turned on his radio and played “The Lemon Song.” I tapped my foot along to the beat and played the guitar riffs in my head. Clay left his hand on the gear shift and tapped his pointer finger along the braided curve of the leather. I could not wait to see his home.

“My mom was freaking out when I told her I invited you over. She screamed ‘The house is so dirty, he’s going to think we’re disgusting!’” Clay belted out a laugh, well actually more of a roar, and I actually joined in.

“You know, your hyena laugh is far funnier than the joke,” I told him.

“Oh, so he does have jokes, who would’ve thought,” Clay said and punched my arm.

I grabbed at my arm and inhaled a deep breath and felt my cheeks puff out as I released the air. It would be a while until I felt safe again, but I’m sure Clay’s family will help.

There was an old man, probably around 70 who was walking his tiny sandy colored Chihuahua. Clay drove by without a second glance and it astounded me how he lacked the urge to take in every sight. I rolled down my window as I saw a woman cutting the beautiful bright green grass in her yard. I took in the smell of the freshly cut blades.

I heard the soft tick tock of the turn signal. Clay pulled into the driveway of an immaculate house. The house looked to be at least 3 stories tall. It was an all white house with five windows protruding from the front and along their sides were sky blue shutters. Even the front door matched the shutters. Nothing about my old house matched. In the center of the cement driveway was an island of flowers. Roses and tulips sprouted up from the soil giving off blinding colors of fiery red, orange, and yellow. It felt as if they were pulling me in. Seducing me with their blistering images.

“Hey, James, you gonna get out of the car any time today?” Clay asked and interrupted my thoughts.

“Oh, yeah. Of course,” I got out of the car and the door slammed shut. The only other car in the driveway was a sleek black BMW convertible.

“Now, how is it fair my mom gets this convertible and I’m stuck with this ugly Taurus? Life isn’t fair, man,” Clay said. For the first time I felt anger towards Clay. He should be happy with what he has. I’d be happy with whatever gifts I would receive from his family. Although I glared at him, he did not notice and ushered me in.

“Mom, we’re home,” Clay screamed.

Soft footsteps became audible in my ears and a petite brunette woman glided down the steps. Her head was held high with her nose in the air.

“Oh, how wonderful it is to meet you, James. Clayton here told me you enjoy playing guitar too, how wonderful. It runs in our family, you know? I play also and my mother before me and her mother before her. Clayton’s father plays the piano though. You’ll have to hear him play he’s just oh so wonderful! And, you can call me Mrs. Urie, sweetie.” She said and her enthusiasm seemed to slap my ears with every word uttered from her mouth. However, I put on a smile and found comfort in her enthusiasm. I saw the beauty in it and concluded I should act more like that.

“It’s really nice to meet you, ma’am. Umm, thank you for your kindness,” I said while fidgeting with my folded hands. She continued talking, but I could only focus on the soft crinkle her nose made when she smiled. The way she looked at Clay with such love. It made my mouth curve from ear to ear. My nerves set in and I longed for my hoodie and the little cross that always shielded me from harm.

“Now, come on in, dinner is just about ready. Clayton’s father will be home any minute. Come on and take a seat at the table.” Mrs. Urie pushed me into the dining room and sat me in a chair and retreated to the kitchen. The table had already been set with fine China plates. The background of the plates were white with an intricate blue Great Wall. There was a red table cloth covering the table. Red reflected off Clay’s brown eyes. His eye color turned into a deep red. It looked just like dried blood.

The front door swung open and Mr. Urie entered. He did not say anything at first. He had loosened his blue and white striped tie and it hung crookedly around his neck. His jacket was on his arm and the sleeves of his white button down were in a messy fold that reached up to his elbows. His blonde, almost white, hair was thinning at the top of his head.

“Oh, I didn’t realize we would be having company. Hello,” Mr. Urie said with a weak smile.

“Hello, sir. It’s nice to meet you,” I replied.

As he slouched into a chair at the table he heaved a barely audible grunt.

“Honey, is dinner about ready?” he asked.

“Just one more minute. I’m waiting for the corn bread to finish,” Mrs. Urie shouted from the kitchen. She entered the dining room with one plate of food at a time. First, she brought in a plate of barbequed chicken, then a plate of mashed potatoes, and with her last trip she brought in the bread.

“Alright, now you all fix your plate and dig in,” Mrs. Urie said while never breaking her smile. I had to force myself to look away from her blinding white teeth, but that did not last long. I ended up looking at her a little more closely this time. Her olive skin matched Clay’s and even the dark shade of their hair was the exact same. Clay seemed to have inherited majority of his mom’s traits. He looked almost nothing like Mr. Urie.

“James, honey, aren’t you going to eat?” Mrs. Urie said and I looked down at an empty plate.

“Oh, yes. Of course, I’m sorry,” I said stammering over my words. I grabbed a spoonful of everything and began eating.

“Don’t apologize, sweetie!” She looked over to Mr. Urie and said, “Now, Daniel, James here plays guitar also. He met Clayton through the music club at school.”

“Oh, wow. What type of guitar do you have?” He asked me.

“A Fender Stratocaster, sir. A 1996 Eric Clapton Strat.”

“And how long have you been playing?” He asked.

“Well, my father gave me the guitar when I was seven, and I’ve been playing since, so seven years, sir,” I said as I played with a little red string that broke off from the table cloth. I watched the red intertwine between my fingers.

“You must be quite good then,” Mr. Urie said.

“He’s better than good, he’s amazing. He practically knows every Zeppelin song by heart,” Clay chimed in. “Hurry up and eat so we can shred!”

I wolfed down the remainder of my meal and thanked Mrs. Urie. That was the strangest meal I’ve ever been to. No one fought or even bickered. They were all so happy. Smiles were present in every corner of the room.

I knew I was making the right decision. I could not wait until tonight.

Clay and I ran up the staircase and he led the way to his bedroom. My eyes widened upon entering his room. On the far right side were eight guitars. Four acoustic and four electric.

“Isn’t it sweet, man? My grandma gave me all of these,” he said while dusting off a sunburst color Les Paul.

“This is insane!” I moved a little too far left and bumped into his bookshelf. An old book fell off and hit the hardwood floor. It was a dark purple color with gold lines creating a border.

“What, no way. That’s our old photo album, check it out,” Clay said while picking up the album. He sat down on his perfectly made bed and the straight sheets crumpled under his weight. I sat beside him and waited for him to reveal the photos. The first page was all baby pictures of Clay. He was wrapped up in a blue blanket in a hospital room and his birth certificate was

beneath the picture. The next page showed him riding a bike with Mr. Urie. It was strange to see Mr. Urie with a head full of hair.

As we got further into the album, Clay's voice dimmed out. All of my attention was on the joyful, rosy checked faces in the pictures.

"James, I said you need to show me some of your childhood photos one day, also," Clay said while nudging my shoulder trying to get my attention.

"Oh, I don't think we have any."

"That's crazy, what family doesn't have a family photo album?"

"You don't know my family," I replied while placing the cover of the album over the pictures so I would not have to see anymore.

"Yeah, you never mention them at all. You said your dad got you your guitar at dinner, though. What's he like? My dad is pretty boring, as you could tell," Clay said while laughing.

"My father died a couple years ago. It's just my mom."

"Dude, I am so sorry. I had no idea." Clay shifted uncomfortably on the bed. He lacked knowledge of what to say.

"It's alright," I said and crossed my arms. I wished again for my hoodie to hide under.

"Well, you know you're always welcome here. And your mom too, of course."

I drew out a breathy laugh and said, "She doesn't matter anymore." Clay asked what I meant, but I changed the subject and recommended we play some guitar.

Hours that felt like minutes passed and we realized it was already 11:00.

"Is it ok if I sleep here tonight?" I asked. My whole plan relied on this moment. I held my breath while waiting for his answer. He happily agreed. He laid out a sleeping bag for me on his floor.

I asked for two pillows and he threw them right at my face exclaiming, "Here, princess."

We laughed and talked for a few minutes more. I slipped into the sleeping bag and laid on my back looking at the pitch black ceiling. Time passed and Clay's soft snoring ruined the silence. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and checked the time: 1:24. I kicked the sleeping bag off and decided I could not wait anymore. I deliberated on how to approach my plan.

I paced around Clay's dark room and I ended up in front of his bookshelf. I used the light on my phone to illuminate the shelves and I grabbed the photo album.

I began looking at the pictures again. So many emotions washed over me and I did not know how to feel. Wait, it was the neutral feeling again. The nothingness consumed my head. Dizziness blazed in my skull. I put my hand on the top shelf to balance myself. I pressed my

fingers to my temple trying to calm my raging headache. Heat was rising to my cheeks and it felt like my face could melt away drip by drip with nothing but bones to supply evidence I was ever in this room. I knew what to do.

I walked out of Clay's room with the photo album still in my hands. I grasped onto the wall to keep myself from falling over. Pictures of the Urie's were present as I walked along the hall. I grasped the frames and took them off their nails and pulled them close to my chest with the album. I made my way down the stairs and continued searching for more pictures. I tried to maneuver around the house as quietly as possible.

I walked into the kitchen and opened up all the drawers until I found what I needed: a pack of matches. One more item to go. I needed to find the garage. I opened up one door- a closet. Peered into another- a bathroom. I looked through one more door, and at last I entered the garage. I felt along the walls until I found a light switch. The sudden light disoriented me and I had to rub my eyes until they adjusted. The BMW was moved into the garage. This was the most organized garage I had seen. A large plastic shelf held all of the tools the Urie's had and they were all placed neatly lacking even a speck of dirt. A large gray ladder rested on the floor leaning up against a wall. Various objects were on top of it. A pair of boots, a hammer, a pack of nails, and an umbrella. That was the only disorganized area in the room.

I walked around to the other side of the car and found what I needed: a gas can. I also found a Polaroid camera. New ideas jumped into my head as the cool surface of the camera grazed my skin. I walked back through the door I came in and walked on my tiptoes. I rested the camera on the dining room table. I made sure I had not dropped any pictures as I made my way to the front door. I unlocked the hatch and the loudest snap reverberated around the house. I waited and made sure no one woke up.

After waiting one more second I opened the door and walked outside. My feet became wet from the droplets of dew in the grass. I found a spot in the trimmed grass where the ground slightly dipped. I placed the album and photos in the dip. I opened the red gas can and the nauseating fumes of the gas hit my nose. I tried to focus on the smell of the fresh grass. I put a splash of gas onto the pictures and then moved the can a good distance away. I grasped the pack of matches and unveiled them from my pocket. I pushed the center and took one of the matches between my fingers. The match glided across the carton and ignited. I held up my hand behind the flame and watched its shadow dance around the creases of my palm. A few droplets of rain fell from the black sky. The rain grazed over the flame and it flickered left and right trying to avoid the extinguish. The match fell out of my loose fingers.

The flames roared upward and I shielded my eyes hoping some of the heat radiating off my face would subside. This neutral feeling allowed my head to clear. I knew what I wanted and I was going to get it.

“James, oh my god are you ok? What are you doing out here?” Mrs. Urie’s voice came from behind me.

“No, this isn’t part of the plan. You’re not supposed to be here!” I said. The rain pounded harder from the sky. The flames lessened until only ash and burnt edges remained. “No no no no, they didn’t all burn,” I said while clawing at my head.

“What did you just say? A-Are those our family pictures? Are you insane? I’m calling the police.” Mrs. Urie started jogging back to the house. I ran after her and tackled her to the ground. I turned her over so she would face me. I sat on her stomach and pinned her left arm to the ground and grasped her throat. Her dark hair flapped around her face and a couple pieces stuck to the sweat of her forehead. Her free arm scratched the exposed skin of my forearm, but her strength grew weaker. Her eyes started fluttering. Her legs kicked less and less until she lost consciousness. I picked up her two drooped arms and drug her into the house.

“This is your fault. This wasn’t part of the plan,” I said to her limp body.

I sat her into the dining room chair. I knew she would wake up soon and I had to get something to tie her down. I went back into the garage and checked the shelves first. On the last shelf I found thick black nylon rope. The bared smile returned to my lips as I made my way back to Mrs. Urie. I licked my dried mouth as I twirled the rope around both of her arms. I tied her legs to the legs of the chair. Right as I cut into string and tied it off, a dazed Mr. Urie walked in. He resembled a child in his pajamas. He stepped into the room yawning while rubbing his tired eyes. I quickly cut off a long piece of the rope.

“Honey? Are you ok?” He asked with his eyes still closed.

I retreated to the shadows and waited. I leaned up against the darkest corner of the room and my black clothes completely camouflaged me. After one more yawn, he opened his eyes.

“What the hell. Honey?” He grabbed at her face and tried to wake her. The wrinkles on the back of his shirt smoothed as he bent forward to match Mrs. Urie’s height. He tugged on the rope that tied her arms and tried to loosen them.

I emerged from my corner and crept behind him. My steps gave off no sound. I played with the rope in my hand as I drew into my target. The soft, thick pattern snaked around my sweaty fingers. I looped the rope once around my palm, secured it with my thumb and repeated with my other hand. I pulled it tight. In one swift motion I curled it around his neck. I felt his pulse jump under my wrist. He tried forcing his fingers under the rope, but I was too strong. His body thumped to the ground. It took me a minute, but I finally pulled him into a chair and began tying him up also. I worried this might ruin my chance. However, I remembered Clay and I knew he would help me.

I walked up the staircase with my head higher than it's ever been. I opened his door and I thought the slight creak had woken him up, but it did not. I watched him on the bed. The rise and fall of his chest calmed me.

"Clay, Clay wake up. Come on, I've got amazing news and I need your help," I said and nudged his shoulder.

"Mmm, go away. It can wait until morning," he said and rolled over on the other side of his bed so his back faced me.

"I'll drag you out of that bed. Come on, Clay. Please, I'm too excited to wait."

Clay let out an exaggerated grunt as he got out of the bed. We made our way down the stairs. He mimicked his father exactly and for the first time I saw their resemblance. He rubbed his eyes in the same counter clockwise motion as Mr. Urie.

"Alright, what did you-" Clay cut off his sentence as his caramel eyes fluttered. His hand flew up to his mouth to muffle his gasp.

"We can be a family now, all of us! No more pain, just happiness. I know it will be hard to convince them, but we can do it. Nobody knows me like you, Clay, and now we can be brothers. We can convince them together." I handed him the Polaroid camera from the table and said, "Come on, take my first picture with Mom and Dad."

Clay flickered around the room and caressed the empty nails hanging on the naked wall.