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Euphoria

Candra Mahrt

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EUPHORIA

by

Candra Dawn Mahrt

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the
University Honors Program

Department of Psychology
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The members of the Honors Thesis Committee appointed
to examine the thesis of Candra Mahrt
find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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ABSTRACT

Euphoria

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This fictional creative thesis follows two kids in high school, Eva and Conner, struggling in unhealthy households. The two quickly become friends, and as they discover similar interests between each other like music, the lives they keep hidden begin to unravel.

“Euphoria” is a novella length realistic fiction piece directed towards young adult readers and explores themes of friendships, high school, and abuse.

KEYWORDS: abuse, high school, teens, young adult, friendship

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Chapter One

Eva's Choice: "He's pulling up in the driveway and you don't make a sound / Cause you always learn to hold the things you wanna say / You're always gonna be afraid..."

"No Love" by Simple Plan

"Eva, have you been thinking about careers?" Dad asked randomly, eyes peering at me rather than his laptop. I had been ignoring his retelling of his coworker Paula's "interesting" story from the past week.

"Uh, kinda?" I replied, feeling the muscles in my arms twitch in their effort to not show my panic.

It was Sunday evening, just a few hours before bed. Almost made it, I sighed mentally.

"What do you mean 'kinda'? This is serious." His voice was sharp, words stinging my skin. I turned away from the TV, feet planted on the carpet, hands locked to prevent them from shaking.

"I...Maybe something with art," I admitted. I smiled to myself, remembering how happy my friends looked whenever I drew them something. Mom always loved the birthday cards I made her. Dad hardly paid attention when I tried to show him my drawings. Clutching my hands together tightly, I forced myself to meet his icy glare.

His balding head turned blotchy red. My mom sat quietly reading from her Kindle.

"Art? What do you mean?" His forehead shriveled as if I had spoken in Spanish.

"Like, an artist, or an illustrator—"

"Are you kidding me?" Dad shut his laptop and set his footrest down. My eyes

turned hot, the muscles in my back straining to keep still. Mom placed her Kindle on the end table between her and Dad's recliners and went to the bathroom. I wanted to run away, too.

"That's not a career, Eva. What are you thinking?" The words felt like a megaphone against my ears, the hopes and dreams in my brain cowering into a far corner of my skull. This wasn't the right answer either, so I stayed silent. *I better not mention wanting to be a writer, either.*

"No one's going to buy your art." He stood and laughed, towering over me. Mom walked out of the bathroom and into their bedroom, turning on the lights. I exhaled slowly as he went to shower. I wanted to leave. Sometimes, I wish Mom would stand up for me, but I understood why she didn't. It was better for one of us to take the brunt of his anger rather than both because he would feel threatened and make Hell rise from its depths to keep us in line.

"Any of the old guys looking down your shirt at work?" Dad's voice drifted into the living room followed by Mom's small mumbles denying it. I resisted the urge to scream.

We were grateful for all he had done and would do, that's how we lived day-in and day-out for everything to remain relatively stable. It was incredibly exhausting.

The final Monday morning of March arrived, but dark clouds remained in my head. The full-blown College Talk was imminent, but I had no idea what to tell my dad. As Joyce pulled up in the big yellow bus, my mind swam with possible careers that would satisfy his demands. At the top of the steps, my thoughts disappeared. I was

normally the first person on the bus, give or take a few elementary kids. But there was a boy sitting a few seats ahead of my normal spot, a high schooler I didn't recognize.

I made my way forward and as I got closer, he looked up and we locked eyes. Chills rushed down my arms, my chest constricting. If I were standing on the edge of a drop-off in the ocean looking down, the color of the water going deeper into that vast abyss was in his eyes. Like abandoned wells surrounded by thick, dark fences of lashes, keeping everyone out. I could see him on the drop-off's edge, looking down into the darkness with envy, his face ashen and hollow. Tears welled up in my eyes, an aching loneliness passed from him to me. He turned away, and I walked past quickly after a few seconds that felt like hours, our connection severing.

The bus lurched forward and went dark as I dropped myself onto the cool brown leather, blinking the sudden tears away. I stared at the boy's head across the aisle ahead of me. His black hair brushed against the high collar of his leather jacket. The large seats prevented any further snooping from where I sat. My heart felt cold and scared whenever I glanced at him, as if I were isolated in the middle of the ocean, treading water. It was very much what I felt during my dad's lectures. He seemed faintly familiar, but I couldn't place him.

At the halfway point of the ride, I decided to text my best friend Cristina asking if we had a new student at school. Cristina knew just about everyone in our junior class. She responded no, but I wasn't entirely convinced because why would a regular student randomly start riding the bus in March? I tried to describe him to her through text: longer dark hair, probably the same height as me, his jacket, and teal eyes. My phone buzzed, Cristina replied that there was a kid in our English class who fit my vague description,

but he wasn't new. I squinted at her text and tried hard to remember everyone in our class. My brain's lightbulb briefly flickered, flashes of him around the classroom came to mind. But what was his name?

Once the second bus dropped us all off at the high school, I made my way to the library to group up with my friends before class. I noticed the "new" kid immediately head toward the second floor, most likely to be early for class or go to his locker. Entering the library, I snuck a glance at the shelves with new books. *Eh, nothing interesting*, I thought. Cristina waved me over to our usual group of chairs. She sat on the arm of the chair that her boyfriend, Felix, lounged in, and I sat down next to them. Brooke and her sleeping sister Alex sat across from us. I had known them all since middle school, so we were very close.

"So, the kid's name is Conner, with an E-R, Frost. He sits almost right in front of Mrs. Williams' desk in our English class," Cristina chirped. Considering we sat right by the door, that would put him across the entire classroom, so I would never really see him if I wasn't looking.

"Wait, Conner, who got a bloody nose during Bio?" Felix asked, gesturing to an imaginary waterfall flowing from his nose. Cristina punched his arm.

"Yeah, him."

"Wasn't he gone all last week?" I asked Cristina.

"He missed English all three days, I don't know about the other two." She shrugged.

"Who is he, Eva?" Felix chimed in, confused.

"He randomly rode the bus this morning," I said.

“So...? Can't he ride the bus?”

“Duh, but he looked *miserable*. I'm just a little worried.” I tugged at my ponytail to release the pulling sensation on my scalp.

“Uh oh, your mom instincts are showing,” he teased, snickering. Cristina punched him again.

“You're a worrywart, you don't even know him,” Brooke added.

“I know, but it was bad, you guys. It felt like I got punched in the chest.”

Cristina patted my shoulder, her soft smile telling me she understood.

“Maybe he took the bus because his car broke down. Like ours might if Alex keeps forgetting to fill it up with gas.” Brooke glared at her sister and threw a pencil at her. Alex nearly fell out of the chair in surprise. Cristina, Felix, and I laughed at her.

“What the fu—” the bell silenced her cursing and everyone in the library started heading to their first classes.

I said goodbye to my friends and walked down the hall to creative writing. Easily my favorite class of the year besides crafts.

After lunch, Cristina and I had English class together. Towards the last thirty minutes of class, Mrs. Williams came to the front to announce a new homework assignment.

“We will begin one of my favorite projects of this final semester. It is a creative project regarding the short stories we have read and discussed by Edgar Allan Poe. There are many options to choose from—like a poster or skit—feel free to ask me if you have an idea that is not listed. I will assign you into pairs; you and your partner will decide

which of the stories you will do your project on! Not everyone will be able to use the same story, so once you find your partner, decide quickly and report back to me! Now..."

Mrs. Williams flipped a page of the packet she held at the front of the classroom. Cristina and I exchanged worried glances. Assigned groups were the worst. We both knew that there were plenty of slackers in our class.

"Let's see. Beau and Mackenzie. Landon and Kristina K. Allison and Matt. Cristina B. and Tanner," the teacher droned. Cristina dropped her head onto the table.

"At least it's not Beau. Tanner could at least do something," I whispered, trying to comfort her. She propped her head up and groaned at me.

"...Liz and Chase. Andrew and Marian. Conner and Eva. And Madison, you're with Thad. Now, go ahead and sit with your partners and decide on the story." Mrs. Williams quickly returned to her desk to avoid the mass of students attempting to reorganize themselves. I sat for a second, shocked, as to who my partner was. What are the odds...? I jumped at the sound of someone's bag on the table where Cristina had been before. Conner quietly sat beside me and moved his bag to the floor. He took out a notebook and pencil, flipping to a fresh page. Seconds passed in silence. Once people began to go back to Mrs. Williams, I mustered the courage to ask, "Which story did you want to do?" My question grabbed his attention from his blank notebook.

"Uh...I liked 'The Black Cat,'" he replied softly. His eyes scanned the table, my notebook, the cabinet behind me, anywhere but my face. I couldn't tell if he was just super shy or if he remembered me from the bus.

"I actually liked that one too," I admitted, writing the title of the story and our names in my notebook. As I ripped the piece of paper out, Conner offered to take it to

Mrs. Williams. I smiled as I gave him the paper. He didn't look at me. He walked swiftly to her desk and gave her the paper but didn't turn to leave. Assuming he had a question, I directed my attention to where Cristina and Tanner sat. Her hands moved rapidly while Tanner tried to decipher what they meant. I stifled a laugh and returned my gaze to Conner...still at Mrs. Williams' desk. Could he really have that many questions? Well, he did miss class last week, I remembered.

Suddenly, Mrs. Williams turned her head, caught me staring and I felt embarrassed. She gestured for Conner to come back to the table, handing him some sheets of paper. As he made his way back, I focused on the clock, surprised to see there were only ten minutes left of class. I felt Conner sit down again. He hardly made any noise, like a ghost.

"Sorry, I had some questions about homework," he murmured shoving the papers into his book bag. One sheet for sure some of us had gotten in class last Wednesday: the reading guide for the first few chapters of a Chris Crutcher book.

"No, it's fine. You're reading *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, then?"

"Ah, yeah. Which one did you pick?" He looked at me, but I didn't feel the immense loneliness from this morning.

"I'm in the group for *Breathing Underwater*, but Mrs. Williams is letting me read both." As I said the book title, the atmosphere changed—his eyes darkened with disinterest. "Ah."

What was that? "Are we working on this in class at all?"

"Yeah, this Friday and next Friday. April 16th is presentation day, before break." Conner closed his notebook and returned it to his bag.

“Okay. Well, let’s exchange numbers since we’ll probably need to get together on the weekends,” I suggested, opening a new contact on my phone and sliding it over to him. He hesitated in pulling out his phone, glancing around for Mrs. Williams, and handed it to me. Leaving my phone on the table, he typed his information in as I swiped to open his phone. There was no password set. It opened to his music, paused on the song “Carolyn” by Black Veil Brides. I heavily resisted the urge to scream as I snuck a glance at Conner typing away. They were my *favorite* band. Realizing that I was supposed to add my number, I quickly opened his contacts and added mine.

I took my phone back and returned his. I wanted to talk to him more.

“You like Black Veil Brides?” I asked.

He whipped his head up, eyes wide. Seeing them in the light, his irises were sparkling teal. He opened his mouth, but the bell scared us both into silence.

“Wai—” he was already gone when I tried to call him back. Cristina walked up beside me, following my gaze out the door.

“Ready?” she asked, going around to the front of the table. I shook my head to focus and stood up to leave with her.

“Did he recognize you?”

“I’m not sure; we just talked about the project. But he likes BVB,” I replied, grinning.

“You’ll get along fine.” She laughed while smoothing her braid over her shoulder.

Close to zero kids in my school listened to anything other than mainstream pop music, but the few that knew bands like Black Veil Brides belonged to the “outcasts,” for lack of a better term. They weren’t bad kids but skipping school and negative attitudes

were things I didn't want to be associated with. My freshman year of high school is when I became attached to rock bands; they provided comfort and reassurance to my existence. Increasingly over the years, I felt like a puppet with the strings pulled taught, being controlled by my dad's expectations. Black Veil Brides helped reduce the tension in the strings before they could snap. These bands sing for those who are struggling, and I couldn't help but wonder why Conner listened to them.

Once chemistry, my last class, was over, I joined the other kids waiting for the bus in front of the school. Conner stood directly beside the curb, ready to pounce on the approaching bus. The rest of us filed inside. I expected Conner to sit towards the back, but he was two seats from the front, earbuds already in and blocking everyone out. He glanced up as I walked by, recognition painted on his face. Fighting away my shyness, I plopped down in the seat behind him. He removed his earbuds as he turned around in his seat.

"Fancy meeting you here," I joked.

A breathy laugh escaped his mouth. "Yeah."

"How often do you ride the bus? I don't think I've seen you ride before."

His eyes darted around, from me to the driver to the back of his seat. "Off and on, not very much," he mumbled.

"Well, welcome." I laughed, gesturing at the bus's interior. "What were you listening to?"

"Uh, Sleeping with Sirens. 'Don't Fall Asleep at the Helm.'"

"You like Black Veil Brides *and* Sleeping with Sirens, how have we never talked before? Can we be friends?"

Conner smiled and lifted his shoulders. “S-sure.”

The overwhelming connection from this morning felt like a lifetime away; what could have made him so sad?

Chapter Two

Conner's Choice: "I'm scared to get close and I hate being alone / I long for that feeling to not feel at all..."

"Can You Feel My Heart" by Bring Me the Horizon

Wednesday afternoon, Cristina and I joined Brooke and Felix at the cafeteria after our second classes. Standing in the Express line, I scanned around for Conner. He wasn't in our line, sitting down, or leaving the regular lunch line. *Did he skip lunch?* I wondered, snagging the last peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"Eva, why do you get PB and J's every time?" Felix asked, picking up a slice of pizza.

"Because it's the cheapest thing besides a cookie, so I don't need to ask for lunch money as often."

"Does your dad really throw a fit over lunch money?" Cristina scrunched her eyebrows.

"He used to, but I also used to get pizza a lot. It's fine now."

I followed Cristina, Brooke, and Felix to a round table where we sat to eat for the next fifteen minutes. I unwrapped my sandwich and took a bite.

"How's it going with that Conner kid?" Brooke asked, wiping the corners of her mouth with her thumb and index finger. She raised her pierced eyebrow at me and smirked.

"Good, I guess? We haven't talked a lot, but he seems fine. Maybe I imagined that weird feeling," I murmured.

"Your Dad must've really gotten to you." Cristina's blue eyes drooped, recalling

my texts to her after the pre-college talk Sunday night. Clouds regrouped in my mind, remembering my dad's comments.

He wasn't exactly concerned about my feelings, I said to myself. I sat back in my chair, crumpling the saran wrap from my sandwich into a ball. The table fell silent as my friends continued munching on their food with a few minutes remaining.

Suddenly, Conner appeared around the corner where the line begins for normal lunch. As he walked past, he caught my stare and slowed. I waved at him, and he smiled back before continuing down the hall that led to our English classroom. *Where had he been?* In the direction he came from there was a smaller hidden cafeteria, just past the kitchen.

"I don't think I've ever seen him smile before," Brooke commented, eyebrows raised.

"Huh, same here. What'd you do to him?" Felix joked, standing up. The rest of us joined him and went to throw out our garbage.

"I don't know, we like a lot of the same bands and stuff. He's nice."

Cristina's hand perched onto my left shoulder as we said goodbye to Brooke and Felix, then we headed towards English.

The warmth in the air soothed my skin as I waited for the bus after school. Ever since lunch, my mind felt groggy as if I had gotten very little sleep. *Oh, tonight I have to call Dad*, I reminded myself. When I started high school, he got a job an hour away driving semis Monday through Friday. He stays in a one-bedroom apartment during the workweek, which Mom drives up to clean a couple times a month. Since he wouldn't be

home until the weekends, we made a deal that I would call him once a week. Most of the times I called, I didn't know what to say. School wasn't super exciting all the time, and if I didn't have enough to say, sometimes he'd get annoyed. The English project would at least be something.

The bus was running late.

I watched the other students chitchat amongst themselves and spotted Conner jogging to the curb. Curious, I speed-walked over to him and tapped his shoulder. He was startled at my touch, flashing fear-filled eyes at me.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

He coughed a couple of times and rubbed his left arm as if to warm himself up.

"Are you riding the bus today?" I asked, knowing we were up farther from where the bus usually stopped.

"Uh, no. M-my dad is picking me up," he disclosed, crossing his arms.

"Oh, that's nice." I stood by him in silence for another minute before a red Chevy pickup rolled up beside us. Conner straightened as the truck came to a stop. The windows were rolled down and a tall man sat in the driver's seat. He had a defined square jaw and short messy black hair.

"Who's this?" the man said, intense dark eyes analyzing me.

"Eva, she's my friend," Conner replied, voice shaking. I waved at the man, but he looked back towards the road.

"Conner, let's go."

"Yes, sir." He whispered goodbye to me before climbing into the truck and speeding off.

The school bus made its thunderous appearance soon after. I sat quietly on the ride home, listening to music, my grogginess morphing into a headache.

Once I finished walking the dogs, and after changing into my pajamas, I called Dad.

“Hey, pumpkin!” Dad answered, rather cheerfully.

“Hi, Dad. What are you up to?”

“Just making some food, got off early today.” A woman spoke in the background.

“Oh, that’s nice. You watching TV?”

“Yeah, what’s been going on over there?” His microwave beeped loudly in the background; the voice now quiet—the TV’s volume slowly being turned up. *Am I hearing things?*

“Well, in English we’re starting a project with those stories we read earlier this year, so that’ll be cool,” I said, staring at the popcorn ceiling of my room.

“Yeah? What kind of project?” he asked between mouthfuls of food.

“Not sure yet, my partner and I are going to discuss it Friday in class. We’ve only got about two weeks to work on it, so we’ll need to meet up during the weekends.”

“When does it need to be done?”

“We present April 16th, so we’ve got a little over a week. Kinda waited ‘til the last minute to get started, but we should be fine.” I sat on the edge of my bed, kicking my feet out like a child.

“Okay, just be sure to get it done. I’m gonna hit the shower. I’ll talk to you later, Eva. Love you.” The woman mumbled something over the male newscaster.

“Love you too.” I hung up and dragged my sluggish self into the living room.

Maybe that was just the landlady.

The first workday for the creative project had everyone antsy to get started. Mrs. Williams stood at the front, granting some groups permission to record or practice in the library’s study rooms. Most of the duos stayed in the classroom, typing away on their laptops. Conner and I both had our notebooks out, observing blank pages.

“Hey,” I said after Mrs. Williams returned to her desk.

Conner’s teal eyes turned to me, a darkness in them skittering out of sight. I noticed scratch marks on his right cheek.

“Where’d you get those?” I asked, pointing to my face.

Conner tilted his head, his black hair grazing his squinted eyes. His fingers rose to brush them, as if he’d forgotten they were there. “Oh, I f-fell off my bike going down that big hill, the one after we turn off your road.” He let out a breathy laugh before continuing, “it was too fast.”

I nodded at his response because I, too, have fallen victim to that hill. Tried to brake going down, but my bike completely flipped over me.

“Well, uh, have you thought about what we should do for the project?” I asked, tapping my nails on the table, stretching my arms.

“What if we make a movie?” he whispered.

“A movie?” I echoed, propping my head up on my left arm, looking at Conner.

“Like a short adaptation.” He crossed his arms, holding his elbows.

“We only need, like four people. You and I can be the protagonist and wife.

Um...maybe my friends can help us," I suggested, secretly pulling out my phone to text Cristina as Conner and I compiled a list of scenes we wanted to include.

"Cristina said she, Felix, and Brooke can help out. If we can figure out a script of sorts, we could start filming next week!" A smile grew on my face. Conner pulled on his leather jacket sleeves, chewing his bottom lip.

We wrote a rough script and planned to start filming after school on Monday. Conner would come over Saturday to help turn the basement into a gloomy shack of sorts.

Climbing off the bus Friday afternoon, finally at home, I walked by Dad's Yukon hooked up to his Lund boat. Once inside, I dropped my anvil of a bookbag beside the leather couch. Mom glanced up at me and grinned. Dad was in the shower.

"Is he going fishing?" I asked, planting myself on the arm of her recliner.

"Yep. He said something about eating with Cody first."

Ah, that makes sense. "My partner, Conner, is going to come over and help me set up the basement for filming, is that okay?" Nuzzling my head against Mom's, I glanced at her Kindle screen, the local newspaper's homepage open.

"That's fine. What time?" She patted my cheek.

"Not sure, might be after noon."

"Do you want me to get pizza tomorrow, then?"

"Sure!" I thanked her, squeezing her shoulders as light from the bathroom flooded the hallway. Dad's heavy cologne masked the normal scent of fresh laundry. *Huh, he only wears cologne when he's going out.*

Once he had changed into a shirt and jeans, he ordered me to grab a can of his chew from the kitchen table before giving us a brief rundown of his week. He talked about his stops around Lauriam Falls, another story his coworker Paula told him. I resisted the urge to ask about this ‘Paula’ as I removed a can of chew from the roll on the table.

“Thanks, Eva,” Dad said, taking the tobacco tin from my outstretched hand. I planted myself onto the leather couch, staring at Guy Fieri’s face on TV, waiting for Dad to leave.

“The other day I ate with Grumpy and some other guys and listen,” he paused, slipping a wad of chew into his left cheek. “His son dropped out of college, some years ago, to be a chef. Ha! Hasn’t talked to his kid since then, and I don’t blame him. What a disappointment,” he chuckled. Mom made some sort of noise from the kitchen in response.

I turned away from Guy and found my dad’s eyes on me.

“I’d do the same thing if I were him,” he deadpanned, his icy stare intense, turning my skin cold.

The next second, Mom appeared, a giant cup of water in hand. She placed it on the end table between their recliners. He flashed her a smile, as if he hadn’t just threatened to disown me. I followed Mom back into the kitchen to make a sandwich for supper. She plopped slices of ham onto a piece of bread as I took two slices of bread for myself. I leaned my head on her shoulder as she added cheese to her sandwich, then briefly touched her head to mine. Maybe she heard what he said. She took her food to her recliner and began to eat, Dad’s voice asking something about the male doctors at the

nursing home where she worked. I slapped my slices of bread, ham and cheese together trying to calm myself.

Leaving the kitchen with my food and a paper towel, I assumed my position on the couch again. All eyes focused on the source of Guy Fieri's loud voice until Dad's phone rang to signal his departure, 'Paula' appearing on the caller ID.

Saturday afternoon, Conner texted me saying he was on his way. I figured he would have gotten a ride from his dad, but after an hour, I wasn't sure if he even was on his way. He knew where I lived because he rode the bus a few times. The weather was beautiful outside, a solid sixty degrees and no clouds in sight. I peeked through the blinds at the road but didn't see him. My palms began to sweat with worry.

"Eva, why don't you call him? Maybe something came up," Mom suggested.

"I'm gonna check outside first, then I'll call him. He said he was on his way over an hour ago." As I walked past, Mom held her hand up for me to hold, and I squeezed it before going down the steps. Opening the front door revealed Conner, red-faced from the wind, on the other side of the screen door about to knock. We both stood for a second, staring at each other, before I unlatched it to let him inside.

"I thought you got lost there." I laughed, watching as he slipped off his silver shoes. He set them neatly beside my haphazard blue Nikes.

"I'm so sor—"

I waved my hands as I started up the stairs. "You're fine, Conner." Looking over my shoulder, it didn't seem like he believed me. I motioned for him to follow me up into the living room. He unzipped his leather jacket, but left it on, before I introduced him to

my mom.

“Nice to meet you, thank you for allowing me over,” he said. Mom and I exchanged a secret surprised glance at his politeness.

“Well, it’s no problem. Have you eaten yet, Conner?” she asked, standing beside the dining table.

“Uh, no, ma’am.” Conner analyzed the hardwood floor leading into the kitchen, body stiff.

“Please, just call me Mrs. Spring. I’ll go pick up the pizza now, so why don’t you two figure out how you wanna set up the basement? We’ll eat when I come back then I can help you with whatever’s left.” She flashed me a smile and patted my head on her way to the top of the stairs, grabbing her keys and light jacket before descending. As Mom opened the front door, she called back to us: “I’ll be right back!”

“Thank you!” My voice made Conner flinch beside me. I gently tapped his shoulder, but he quickly moved away from my touch toward the stairs. “I didn’t mean to scare you,” I said.

“I’m f-fine,” he whispered, following me down into the basement.

“First of all, this can go in here,” I said, sliding the Tupperware container of dog food into the laundry room. Both of us then stood in the open space, analyzing the array of boxes.

Conner looked around, but his eyes weren’t focused on anything. They were dark.

What could we do? I worried. He seemed...not *here*. I thought for a minute.
Music.

“How about I play some music?” My question jolted his body back into reality.

“Hm?” He blinked rapidly, looking at my face as if I just appeared.

He is super out of it today. “Music, for inspiration.” I wiggled my phone at him. He nodded, ruffling his hair on the right side of his head.

Opening my music app and shuffling the songs, I couldn’t help grinning to myself. Conner’s eyes lit up as the first notes of “New Religion” by Black Veil Brides began to play. We both started singing along, reciting the speech at the end of the song without hesitation—as if the lyrics were engrained in our minds. We completely abandoned moving the rest of the boxes, having only completed making an alcove in one corner for the final scene. Song after song, Conner never hesitated on any words. After almost twenty minutes of dancing around and practically screaming, I paused the music to let us breathe. Conner lowered himself onto the carpet just laughing, a sound so pleasant. His laughter calmed as I spoke. “I’ll go get us some water.”

Conner stood back up. “I’ll come, too.”

On the way to the fridge, I couldn’t remember a time when I felt so elated, almost euphoric. The smile on my face refused to falter. Cristina and I used to sing along with the car radio, but the way that alternative rock music spoke to me felt much more personal. As if the cores of ourselves were exposed but rather than judging each other, we understood each other. Conner plopped onto the living room floor while I poured water into two glasses.

“Here,” I said, setting a glass on the table as Conner almost rose from the dead off the carpet. He took a few hesitant sips before taking a long drink.

“That was so much fun.” I sighed, leaning back on my hands.

“I’ve *never* felt like this.”

“Like what?”

“So happy.”

I stared at him, not quite sure what he meant. The joy in his eyes felt like a parched traveler in the desert had finally discovered an oasis. Was he telling the truth, had he never felt this happy before? That can't be true. Instead of questioning him, I let him have this moment, in case he was being honest.

Suddenly, the front door opened, shocking me and causing Conner to choke on a gulp of water. He coughed violently into his lap, wheezing with every inhale. I tried to pat his back, but he jolted away from my hand.

“Who's dying up here?” Mom asked, appearing at the top of the steps, pizza box in hand.

“We're okay, he just swallowed some water wrong...”

As Conner's coughing died, I could barely hear him whisper “bathroom” as he stood up.

“First door on your right,” I told him. As he turned to leave, tears reflected off his cheeks. Something's not right, I concluded.

“What were you two doing?” Mom asked from the kitchen. I stood up and stretched my legs, then joined her. She was putting slices of pizza onto three plates.

“We practically had a party,” I joked, laughing at her raised eyebrow. “Thanks for getting food.”

“No problem, punkin.” She handed me a plate as the bathroom door opened and Conner returned to the living room. I took a second plate from Mom and set them both onto the coffee table.

“Are you okay?”

“I-I’m fine. Thank you,” he said after clearing his throat a few times, picking up his cup of water to drink again. His hand trembled.

Mom accompanied us as *Toy Story*’s ending played and we munched on pizza. Once we finished eating, the three of us headed to the basement again to finish setting up. Conner and Mom hung up dark sheets over the windows while I moved boxes to simulate chairs and some sort of table in the far corner.

“That didn’t take near as long as I thought,” I realized out loud.

“There’s three of us,” Mom paused, “Are you two going to start filming today?”

Conner and I looked at each other, having not thought this far ahead.

“We could record your solo shots today, if you want?”

“Uh, well...” He pulled out his phone to check the time. “I should actually be getting home.” Conner scratched the side of his neck, the high collar of his jacket lifting the ends of his hair.

“I can give you a ride, then,” Mom offered, heading towards the stairs.

“Oh, no-no, thank you. I can wa—”

“Nonsense, come on.” She smiled, waving at us to follow her. Conner glanced at me, holding his arms. He must be nervous, almost like a little kid, I thought. I walked up beside him and slowly, so he could see my hand, touched his arm.

“I’ll come with.”

He nodded, slightly relieved. I rubbed his arm as we followed my mom to her Buick outside. Mom glanced at me through her rear-view mirror as I buckled myself in the backseat beside Conner. He directed Mom to his apartment building, one of the

complexes on the street connecting our neighborhoods. The drive was hardly five minutes. A parking lot for the apartments was hidden behind the buildings, and Conner led us to the very first of the five buildings. His father's red pickup sat a little crooked in a parking space, so he was home.

"Thank you for the ride, Mrs. Spring."

"No problem, Conner."

I got out of the car to get into the passenger seat, returning Conner's shy wave goodbye before sitting down. Mom and I waited until he was safely inside before heading back home.

"He's a real nice kid," Mom said.

"Yeah, he is." I sighed.

Back at home, Mom curled into her recliner, Kindle in hand, wearing her college nursing program shirt. I sat in Dad's broken recliner; the seat uneven because he only sat in one spot for so many years. I always sat in his chair while he was in Lauriam Falls, so I would be closer to Mom.

"Hey, Mom?"

"What's up, babes?" She looked up from *Outlander*, leaning her thin hair against the back of her chair.

"I think Dad's cheating," I said, fighting the rage gurgling in my stomach. She blinked a few times, registering what I said.

"What makes you think that?" she asked slowly.

"He keeps asking if you're cheating. There was a woman at his apartment when I

called last week and Paula called him when he was supposed to eat with Cody last Friday,” I stated.

A few moments of silence passed.

“You’re probably right.” She sighed heavily, setting her Kindle on the end table between us.

“You knew?”

“I’ve found things at his apartment before that didn’t belong to me and certainly didn’t belong to him.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Really? Have you—?”

“He turned the conversation around on me when I tried to ask him about it. Anything that isn’t him caught in the act will somehow be my problem.”

I groaned, sliding my hands down my face in frustration. “How are we gonna catch him? Would that even work?”

“If we can catch his ass red-handed, he’s out of here.”

I reached my hand out for Mom’s and smiled as she held it.

Chapter Three

Eva's Choice: "I see a pain behind your eyes / I know you feel it every day / It's like
a light that slowly dies / But it's better not to say..."

"The Stigma (Boys Don't Cry)" by As It Is

Monday morning was warm, a gentle breeze tousling my hair as the bus rumbled around the corner. I flashed Joyce a smile as I climbed the steps, no longer surprised to see Conner in his usual seat. Unlike every morning last week, he didn't turn to acknowledge my presence walking toward him. His head never moved, facing the fiery sky beyond the window, but his eyes were dull—a storm approaching on the open ocean. It was the same dazed look he had on Saturday after Mom went to get food. He didn't even register my bag hitting the back of his seat as I sat down.

"Conner, hey," I said to grab his attention.

Nothing.

"Conner," I droned, poking the side of his head. He whipped his head toward me, a hand covering where I touched him, the other ripping headphones out of his ears. No wonder he didn't hear me.

"Wha—Oh, it's you." He sighed, shoulders slouching. Conner took a few deep breaths, pausing his music.

"I'm sorry! You scare *really* easily." I squeezed the back of the leather seat as I watched him straighten up. "Conner?"

"What?"

I chewed my lip for a moment, not sure how he would react. We were the only ones on the bus so far, besides Joyce, but we were almost at the back. She wouldn't be

able to hear us.

“Are you okay?” He blinked a few times at my question, then narrowed his eyes.

“I’m fine?”

He’s lying, but he clearly doesn’t want to talk about it. *Shoot.* “Sorry, um. Never mind.” I wracked my brain for another topic, anything. “Hey, can you eat lunch with my friends and me today?”

“Uh—”

“Then you can meet everyone before we film after school,” I interrupted, hoping to discourage him from rejecting the invitation. He heaved a sigh.

“Are you sure it’s okay for me to join?” His fingers brushed his left bicep, apprehensive.

“Of course, it is. Any friend of mine is a friend of theirs.” I had already asked the gang if he could eat with us anyway and they were excited.

“Well, okay.” Conner smiled, his eyes soft as if looking at newborn puppies. I loved it when he smiled. Brooke and Felix commented last week that they’d never seen him smile before. I wanted to know why. His attachment to rock music was like mine, even like the “outcast” group, we used it to cope. If anything, his dad didn’t seem too keen on meeting me, and he called him ‘sir’. Who calls their dad that? He must be really strict, maybe in the military. As I pondered, I rested my chin on my folded arms on the back of Conner’s seat. I didn’t realize he was still looking at me.

“Hey.”

I turned my attention from his father to him. “Hmm?”

“Is Eva short for something?” he asked, leaning his shoulder against the seat in

front of his.

Just a little surprised, I didn't know what to say. The only time my full name was said was at home occasionally, or when my new teachers take attendance for the first time. "It's short for Evangeline," I whispered. I loved my name, but it sounded too fancy for modern day America.

"Evangeline?"

"Yep. Little weird, isn't it?"

"No, it's unique. It suits you," he said.

"Ah, thanks." I couldn't help feeling touched that he didn't find my name weird.

After minutes of silence, we discussed our favorite songs from the bands we both liked for the rest of the ride.

Cristina and I waited by the opened double doors leading to the cafeteria for Conner. I stood on my tiptoes to see over the sea of students swarming to the lines, wincing when Cristina elbowed me.

"Here he comes," she said, pointing down the hallway. Sure enough, Conner was coming from the direction of our classroom, having dropped off his bookbag. I waved to him and he waved back, smiling.

Once he caught up with us, I introduced him to Cristina, who leaned forward and waved at him. His cheeks glowed like warm honey and I couldn't help but laugh at his shyness.

Felix and Brooke greeted us as we joined the Express line. We did brief introductions with them, during which Felix decided he wanted a high-five. Conner

tapped his hand to Felix's palm like a child might to a stranger. He seemed satisfied with it anyway. Shuffling on in line, I grabbed a PB&J as Conner ogled at the choices.

"What are you going to get?" Brooke asked, noticing his fascination with the salads.

"I d-don't know. I don't actually have lunch money right now..." he whispered, straightening up. He brushed strands of dark hair from his eyes.

"Pick what you want, I'll pay." Conner and I both stared at Brooke's face.

"What?" she asked.

"You don't have to. I'll get a milk, I'll be fine—" Conner shook his hands at her, but Brooke held up her ringed index finger to stop his motions.

"Nonsense. You can buy me a cookie later," she grinned sweetly. Her gray eyes glanced at me, and I mouthed *thank you* to her. She scrunched her nose and waggled her head at me, her strange way of accepting gratitude.

We all munched on our food and eagerly talked about filming after school. Felix offered to take all of us back to my house in his truck after school.

Cristina, Brooke, and I piled into the back of Felix's pickup as Conner hopped into the passenger seat. My palms were sweaty with excitement as we exited the parking lot, bobbing our heads to *Sleeping with Sirens*.

As we rounded the bend and up the hill, my Dad's Yukon was nowhere in sight. I mentally cheered. Mom was also walking the dogs for me in the field beyond our yard. Felix parked behind Mom's Buick, and we girls in the back nearly fell out the doors.

"I've got the outfits and props downstairs," I said, leading everyone inside and

down the steps. The booms of their bags hitting the carpet echoed around the space.

“Conner, I’ll do your makeup once we style your hair.” Brooke gestured at Conner, already lathering her hands with hair gel. He made his way to her, dodging Felix’s scarf he threw over his shoulder. Conner squeezed his eyes shut as Brooke swept his hair away from his forehead, smoothing the sides back. Cristina contoured Felix’s face to age him into a hardened detective as I changed into the brown patterned dress in the laundry room for my role as the wife. I never wore dresses to be rebellious with my friends, but I never felt totally comfortable in them. I wasn’t exactly skinny, so I would have to suck in my belly in order to look pretty. This dress wasn’t any different. Pulling out my ponytail, I tousled my hair to make it look less lifeless. Satisfied, I rejoined the rest of the crew. Conner looked incredibly different and we both seemed to do a double take.

“Okay, lovebirds, time for some couple shots!” Cristina cheered, waving my digital camera in the air. I rolled my eyes at her joke. Conner and I filmed scenes in our makeshift living room, outside strolling arm in arm. We talked about random things to make it seem like we were having an important conversation: music, the weather, how Conner almost fell because of a gopher hole in the front yard. When it came time to kill me off, we had filmed some of Conner’s solo shots of his descent into madness. He scuffed up his hair and Brooke added makeup underneath his eyes to showcase the descent. His acting was spectacular; he could slur his lines perfectly, even his stumbling had Felix standing by, ready to catch him. At one point, all three of us thought he was going to fall off my front steps into the thorn bush. The murder scene happened near the stairs, he had to pretend to axe me going down. The first take went smoothly, but the

second part where I had to look at him was causing issues. Conner couldn't be convincing enough for some reason. Every time he raised the axe, something made him scared, his teal eyes flickered with darkness. After ten minutes of being unable to film it, we decided to take a break. Cristina headed upstairs to get us Capri Sun pouches. Conner paced by the covered windows, clearly distraught. I reached out for his arm to stop him, a jolt spreading throughout his body at my touch.

"Are you okay?" I asked softly, patting the boxes for him to sit down with me. He sat, hands fumbling with each other. He was extremely anxious.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You don't need to apologize, just talk to me. What's going on in your head?" I patted his shoulder gently.

"It's dumb."

"No, it's not."

"I'm afraid...that I'll hurt you," he mumbled, looking away from me.

"What do you mean, Conner?" I scrunched my eyebrows.

A groan escaped his throat. "M-my character's behaviors are a little overpowering? I'm scared that if I...if I embrace his character, I might actually hurt you."

I didn't dare laugh although his worries were silly, but he was dead serious. He was really afraid of hurting me.

"For one thing, I don't believe you would ever hurt me. But, since this is really bothering you, we can have Cristina do some jump cuts of you swinging the axe, me flinching, then me dead. How's that sound?" I suggested as Cristina returned with juice. Brooke and Felix finished setting up the fake blood pool, provided by Brooke's sister

Alex, at the base of the stairs.

“I’m sorry—”

“Conner, stop. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable with this, okay?” I rubbed his shoulder and stood up to inform Cristina of the changes.

“Thank you.” His voice was so quiet I almost didn’t hear him. He followed me, taking a juice from Cristina.

She was rather excited about the change, saying it’ll be more dramatic for the movie. We filmed the rest of the scenes without any issues, and I could see why Conner was so anxious. He got a little too into his role of a drunkard, nearly knocking over the alcove of boxes in the other corner of the basement, almost crushing Brooke under them as she directed the stuffed cat. Other than that, we finished up after just a few hours. We changed out of our costumes and Brooke helped Conner wipe off his five o’clock shadow.

“Damn, we did pretty good, it’s only a little after seven,” Felix commented after helping Cristina take down the sheets over the windows. Conner’s eyebrows shot up, his mouth agape. He took out his phone to double check.

“I have to get home,” he said frantically, putting his phone back in his jean pocket and grabbing his bookbag from inside the laundry room. He immediately started up the stairs.

Felix offered, “I can give you a ride, if you wa—”

“No, it’s okay. See you guys.” He left with streaks of makeup still on his face. A few seconds later, I could hear Rudy and Reload barking. He’s going through the backyard...through the field behind our house would be the quickest way to the main

road. His dad must be *strict*.

“He was so good,” Brooke commented as we finished cleaning the basement. Felix and Cristina nodded enthusiastically.

“He *transformed*,” Cristina emphasized with jazz hands. “You didn’t do too bad yourself.” She winked at me. I stuck my tongue out in return.

“Does he do theater?” Felix asked as the four of us crowded the landing, the others sliding on their shoes.

“I have no idea actually.” Although Conner and I chitchat about bands, that’s all we talk about. I don’t really know what he likes to do, I realized.

“You guys have been almost attached at the hip for the past week. I’ve never seen him, well, happy in general, I guess.” Brooke spoke while fixing her bangs with black painted fingernails.

“We just connected instantly...” I huffed, searching for words. I want to know him, I can feel him struggling with something, and I want to be there for him. “I feel like a protective sister.” Cristina laughed with me before coming in for a hug.

I thanked them for helping as they left, then joined Mom upstairs to watch *American Idol* and read some chapters in *Breathing Underwater*.

Friday morning, Conner followed me to the circular table in the library near the pamphlets about smoking and STDs that have never been touched. Felix immediately greeted us, lifting his bag off the chair beside him so Conner could sit down. I sat next to Brooke and Cristina, who were finishing Algebra II homework before class. Alex showed up through the back door that led to the art rooms, where she probably had been since she got here, and plopped down on my right.

“How’s the dragon claw coming along?” I asked after she chugged half her water bottle, dried clay splattered on her fingers.

“It’s proving difficult. Making each individual scale is a nightmare,” she expressed, stretching her fishnet-covered arms straight out then setting her chin onto the heel of her hand. Felix held his phone out for Conner to look at, probably showing him videos of his red husky, Knight. I smiled and turned back to Alex.

“How’s your video project going?” she inquired, eyes drifting from me to Conner.

“We’re going to start editing today in class,” Conner replied.

Brooke suddenly broke free from her math homework and nearly scared us all. “Guys! Tonight, sleepover at our house?” She gestured between herself and Alex, a giant grin on her lips. Cristina and Felix mumbled their attendance, attention on homework and a dog, respectively.

“I don’t think Dad will let me, it’s super short notice.” I shrugged.

“Just tell him you’ll finish the editing there and we’re gonna celebrate,” she argued.

“Okay, I’ll try.”

“Good. Conner, you’re invited too,” Brooke added, noticing his silence, eagerness shining in her gray eyes like stars.

“Oh, uh, I’ll try to make it.” His voice was soft and unsure, but his eyes reflected Brooke’s excitement.

I wanted to go; it’d been so long since we did a group sleepover because Dad would never let me go. They were always “too short notice” or he wanted to “spend time together” even though he would go out drinking with his friends anyway. Hopefully,

using it as an excuse to finish our assignment would persuade him enough. I texted Mom before class and she was fine with it.

After lunch, Conner and I asked Mrs. Williams if we could work on our project in one of the library's study rooms. She said yes, so we both settled down in the small room at the only table in front of a white board. I pulled out my laptop and brought up Movie Maker to import all the clips Cristina had taken on my camera. We watched the videos to determine their order, and if any were usable for bloopers. Whenever our characters spoke, Conner and I both cringed, giggling at our acting.

"You remind me of my sister," he commented as we played a video of us walking together in my front yard.

"You have a sister?" My question surprised him, realizing he said that out loud.

He scrambled for words. "Uh, well, I had an older sister."

I tilted my head, confused at his use of past tense.

"Her name was Emma. My, uh, mom took custody of her when my parents divorced, and we lost contact." He fell silent.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"We used to make videos like this all the time. Doing this reminded me of her, but it made me happy." A tiny smile appeared on his face as his eyes welled with tears. He let me rest my hand on his arm. "Your laugh sounds like her." Conner wiped at his eyes, his hands covered in tiny white scars under the harsh overhead light. I stayed quiet as his sniffles subsided, knowing I had no words to comfort him.

Once a few minutes passed, Conner told me to start the video again. We organized the footage chronologically as if he had never mentioned Emma. By half past one, the video was put together with its voice over, with some bloopers after the credits. Conner and I packed up to head back.

“I have some ideas in terms of music, so tonight I can add those, and we’ll be done,” he said on the way back to the classroom.

“That shouldn’t take too long at all. Wow.” I breathed, surprised at how fast time went by. “Are you riding the bus after school?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, if I think of any songs during my last class, I’ll run them by you then.”

Conner nodded as he went to sit at his normal spot in front of Mrs. Williams’ desk. Cristina watched me sit down.

“Tanner driving you crazy yet?” I teased her, waiting for the bell to ring.

“Please don’t even talk to me about that, I nearly pulled my hair out,” she complained, petting her braid against her shoulder. “How were my cameraman skills?”

I chuckled, giving her a thumbs up. “The clips were good, all we need is music.”

“I hope your Dad lets you come tonight.”

“Me too, Cris. Me too.” I hoped that using the project excuse would do the trick, but I could never know with him.

Conner wished me luck as he got off the bus at his apartment building and it calmed my nerves just a little. Searching for something else to focus on, my brain settled on Emma. I couldn’t imagine how devastated he probably felt when his mom left with

her. *Has he tried to find her after that?* Sometimes I wished that I had a sibling, then maybe Dad wouldn't be so demanding of me, maybe he'd invest a little into 'our' interests. I laughed at myself. Maybe if I'd been a boy that enjoyed hunting and fishing, we would've been closer. *Probably wouldn't make a fucking difference*, I thought as Joyce approached my house.

Dad's green Yukon was parked facing his boat in the driveway. Mom's Buick was gone, she was still at work. The dogs barked and spun in their kennels, impatient as always for their food. I walked briskly across the lawn and into the house, Dad's heavy cologne assaulting my nose as I opened the door.

"Eva?" His voice echoed from the master bedroom.

"Hey Dad," I called back.

"Hey, do you have plans for tonight?"

I paused after dropping my bag by the couch. *What?* "Actually, yeah. Brooke and Alex invited me to a sleepover to celebrate finishing that English project." I stood still in the living room, waiting for his response.

"Good, better get an A on that. You can go, but not before six," he said, emerging into the hallway to point at me.

Well, that was easy. "Thanks. Are you going somewhere?" I went to the kitchen to get the dog food bowls ready.

"Dinner with Cody."

"Oh, fun." *Uh huh*, I thought.

He didn't respond to me, so I went downstairs to fill the bowls and head outside before he changed his mind.

Chapter Four

Conner's Choice: "A thousand stars burning in the sky up overhead / How could it get more beautiful than this? / And it made me think of when, when in my life have I ever felt more infinite?"

"Fly" by Sleeping With Sirens

When Mom got home, I made her a salad in thanks for letting me go to the sleepover. She chewed gratefully, comfortable in her recliner as Dad scrolled endlessly on his phone. Sitting on the couch, I glanced at the driveway every five minutes, waiting for Felix's hunter green truck to pull in. As soon as I saw the headlights, I leaped off the couch, almost tripping over Dad's outstretched feet. Grabbing my overnight bag with my laptop, I practically ran out of the house saying goodbye over my shoulder. Conner sat in the backseat and waved as I hopped into the passenger seat.

Felix's red husky, Knight, greeted us at the door along with Brooke. I gave Knight a few pats before heading inside, the boys following behind me. We all herded to the kitchen, catching Cristina and Alex already halfway into a slice of pizza each.

"You started without us?" Felix whined, kissing Cristina's cheek before snagging a bite from her slice. She swatted her hand at him as he pulled a chair closer to her and grabbed a piece of his own. I found a spot beside Conner and indulged myself, having not eaten since lunch. In between bites, I pulled out my laptop and pulled up our movie project.

"Got your songs?" I asked Conner with a mouthful of pizza. He nodded, pulling out his phone.

Once we had all stuffed ourselves, we gathered around the laptop as Conner

downloaded the songs he wanted to put in the movie. Brooke and Alex oohed every time he'd play a clip back to accurately start and stop each song. Everyone broke into laughter when Felix's detective character showed up with his eyeliner mustache. The video was around ten minutes long, and now it had its own soundtrack.

"Idea! Let's watch it on the TV!" Cristina practically shouted, clapping her hands.

"I'll make popcorn!" Alex cheered as Brooke took the laptop into the living room to hook it up.

"It's gonna be so good," I said to Conner. He smiled, his teal eyes gleaming with pride.

The microwave beeped and the smell of popcorn flooded the kitchen. I grabbed a bowl from her as she put in another bag. "Go ahead, I'll get this one," she chirped.

I gestured for Conner to come with and joined everyone else on the living room floor, Brooke ready to press play. As soon as Alex slid in with the second bowl of popcorn, Brooke started the video and we all munched, instantly immersed. I kept looking away to check everyone's reactions. Alex had her mouth open the whole time. When it came time for my death scene, Conner turned his head away as Cristina cheered for the success of the jump cuts. Conner's fingers curled around his elbows, nails digging into the leather of his jacket. I gently laid my left hand over his fingers, trying to bring him back from wherever his mind was wandering. He slowly faced the screen again, glancing at me for a second. *It's okay*, I wanted to say, but hoped my face conveyed it to him. His arms relaxed slightly before his eyes returned to the movie.

All of us clapped and cheered after the bloopers, exchanging high-fives as Knight hopped around us wagging his fluffy tail.

“Holy cow, that was *great*,” Alex said after practically picking up her jaw off the carpet. Brooke shook her by the shoulders, grinning wildly.

“I have to say, whoever played that detective did a fantastic job,” Felix added boastfully.

“Indeed. Everyone did so well.” Cristina gestured to us all, then pointed at Conner. “You, sir, need to take up acting. Holy crap.”

Conner’s cheeks flushed red as he waved off her praise, a tiny smile on his lips.

“She’s right. You could play a lead *and* produce the movie’s soundtrack. Seriously,” I chimed in.

“Thanks guys.” His voice sounded small, like a bashful child. *I feel like such a proud sister.* My thoughts wandered to Emma, how she’d be proud of him too.

“Have you ever thought about doing acting?” Felix questioned, combing through his sunshine hair.

Conner simply shook his head no, pulling at his jacket sleeves.

“It wouldn’t be easy, but you’ve got talent.” Cristina stood and ruffled his hair. He sat frozen for a minute, staring at the floor before one hand slowly patted down the wayward strands. Cristina and Felix began setting up the Wii for a dance battle as Brooke disassembled my laptop from the TV. Conner, Alex, and I all scooted over to the far couch to give Felix and Cristina room to dance.

“Have you thought about what you wanna do?” I asked Conner as Alex shoved a handful of popcorn into her mouth, offering some to Brooke on the adjacent couch.

“Not really, no.”

“Your parents haven’t grilled you yet?” Brooke asked, her pierced eyebrow

raised.

Conner shook his head again, long hair framing his sullen face. “N-no.”

“That must be nice,” I mumbled to myself, jealous of that freedom. I’ve worried for years about keeping A’s on report cards, even midterms that would change later. In middle school, when my dad saw the singular B on one midterm, he hammered into my skull that A’s were the only way to go, that that one B was an F in disguise. I remember pleading with him that it was just temporary, I would fix it. My hands turned clammy at the memory. Alex chewed her popcorn loudly as Felix and Cristina danced to “Eye of the Tiger.”

“It’s not.” I barely heard Conner’s voice above the music and Brooke’s cackling, as if I wasn’t supposed to hear him, like he wasn’t meant to hear me. I looked at him watching the two dance energetically, a ghost of a smile on his face—his expression was lonely, as if he’d always been a bystander observing happy situations but was never part of one.

“What do you want to do?” Conner asked, suddenly facing me. Alex took the popcorn bowls back to the kitchen and brought two glasses of water for Cristina and Felix.

I sat back on the couch, thinking about how different Conner and my Dad’s questions were between general interest and waiting for the correct answer. “I really want to be an author,” I continued softly, “but my dad won’t have it.”

“Oh.”

“No offense, but your dad needs to chill,” Brooke commented before taking a Wii remote from Cristina.

“Yeah, well, I can’t exactly do much about it.” I shrugged.

“It’s your life,” Conner whispered. I gave him a soft smile of thanks. The next song was “Who Let the Dogs Out?” and I immediately took Felix’s controller. I held the highest score with this song on my own game, and I was determined to win. Brooke approached me, an evil grin on her face. She knew this was my song, they all knew this was my song.

“You’re going down,” I threatened.

“We’ll see about that,” she returned. I hit play and it was on.

“Go Eva!” I heard Conner’s voice over Alex hyping up Brooke and felt my heart swell. It was a close match, but I reigned supreme. Brooke bowed to me as the rightful Queen of this song and I handed my remote to Alex.

Once the remote was in her hand, Alex pointed at Conner. “I challenge you.”

Surprised, Conner slowly got to his feet. Felix cheered for him.

“Here you are, noble warrior.” Brooke kneeled, holding the remote like a samurai’s sword. We all laughed. Conner took her remote and stood beside Alex, ready to take on the Spice Girls. Cristina, Felix, Brooke and I acted as a backup choir, singing along to “Wannabe” and occasionally mimicking the dance moves. We spent about an hour and a half playing Just Dance and Just Dance 2, and when it finally came to the ultimate battle, all of us were spent. Felix and Conner were the two with the most wins, so the final winner would be decided by the best song on Just Dance 2: “Rasputin.” Right off the bat, the two were struggling with jazz hands. By the end of the song, both Felix and Conner were on the floor, trying and failing to register their moves with the Wii from the ground. Felix won because he managed to somehow nail the golden move at the end

of the song. My stomach hurt from laughing so hard, Brooke's makeup ran down her cheeks. We all joined those two on the floor until we could all breathe properly again. The euphoric feeling from last Saturday with Conner intensified in this moment. I rolled onto my stomach to look at everyone, smiles on all their tired faces.

"I love you guys," I whispered to them all. Cristina lifted her dead arm trying to find my hand to hold. I clutched it tightly. The others nodded and mumbled similar statements. I lay down on my back, touching my temple to Conner's shoulder. Next thing I knew, Conner's sweaty head was leaning on mine. I was so glad that my friends took him in with no problem. After nearly falling asleep on the living room floor, the six of us staggered to the basement. Brooke and Alex went to change into pajamas in their room, leaving Cristina, Felix and me to fight over the bathroom. Once I had my moon-pattered pajama pants on, I settled onto the floor beside Brooke and Conner. Alex had started playing *Rise of the Guardians* while I was changing. Alex and Cristina lay on their bellies on the pull-out couch to our left, and Felix sprawled out on the couch behind us. Cristina, Brooke and I all cried when Jamie saw Jack for the first time—it got us every single time. I saw Conner sniffle out of the corner of my eye and gently rubbed his back. The reflection of Sandy's golden dream sand in Conner's eyes made them look magical, filled with wonder. *I guess he's never seen this movie before now.* Once it was over, there was a unanimous vote to sleep. Brooke and Alex took the pull-out couch, Cristina took the sofa in front of the TV, and Felix took the last couch on the right. Conner and I each lay a comforter down on the floor and settled in. I slept toward Cristina, Conner facing the TV.

I woke up to a warmth leaving my hand and a faint buzzing noise. Squinting

against the harsh light of the near-muted TV, I caught Conner pulling his own hand away from mine as he sat up. In a matter of seconds, he was up and darting towards the bathroom. With great effort, I ignored my screaming muscles and sat up rubbing my eyes. Conner's jacket was abandoned on his comforter beside mine. The rest of my friends were sound asleep. I was a light sleeper when I wasn't in my own bed or house. To stay quiet, I gradually got to my feet, wobbly as they were and wrapped my comforter around my shoulders. As I neared the bathroom, Conner's hushed hoarse voice escaped underneath the door. He apologized over and over. *Who's he talking to?* I fought with myself on what to do: do I knock or leave him be? Chewing my nails, I went back and forth until I heard him sniffing.

I knocked lightly on the wooden door.

Silence.

"Conner?" I questioned softly, turning the handle. Peeking my head in, Conner looked up from his spot on the rug in front of the bathtub, his expression cold, the abysmal waters in his eyes reflecting back at me. I immediately rushed over to him, managing to quietly close the door behind me.

"Hey, hey. What's going on?" I sat beside him, draping half my blanket around his knees—just to offer some type of comfort. His cheeks were red, tears streaming so soundlessly. He cradled his phone in his trembling hands. Then I saw his arms. His forearms were painted with discoloration, from pink scars and scarlet scratches to the yellow of healing bruises. I couldn't suppress my gasp of horror.

"Conner, wha—"

"I have to go home," he choked out.

“Did something happen? Hey,” I whispered as I brushed his shoulder. Conner moved away from me and tried to stand. His whole body was rigid, on alert.

“*I have to go home,*” he repeated. I heaved myself off the bathroom rug and stood by his side.

“Okay, I’ll walk with you. Is that okay?” I leaned into his line of sight to make sure he was still present. His dull eyes focused on me as his tears dried and barely nodded. *He’s like a zombie.*

“Alright, let’s get your jacket. I’ll grab my phone,” I stated, following him back into the TV area. Conner picked up and put on his jacket. I slipped my phone into my pajama pants’ pocket, leaving the comforter on the floor, and slipped on my purple jacket. My heart thundered in my chest, anxiety in overdrive. He waited for me by the stairs before heading up. Knight’s ears perked up as we put our shoes on by the front door. I patted his head a few times and pressed my finger to my lips, as if he understood to be quiet. He tilted his head to the side as I shut the door gently. I moved my phone to my jacket pocket, noting it was past four in the morning. *What could his dad want at this hour?* There was one streetlamp between Brooke and Alex’s house and the main road, Dakota Street, casting its amber light into the dark night. Conner stayed silent, completely pale, but I could hear the faint clicking of his teeth chattering. A light breeze bit our noses as we crossed the main road, through the ditch, and onto the landing of the first apartment building.

“You can go now,” Conner whispered, reaching for the doorknob. His jacket sleeve pulled back, revealing the tiniest glimpse of violet on his wrist.

“Are you sure?” I hugged my arms to my chest, a chill settling over my skin.

“Please, just go,” he said sternly, turning the knob.

“Will you be okay?” I asked without thinking. He turned to me and flashed a fake smile before stepping inside and shutting the door. Every cell in my body blared warning sirens and I went to stand on the sidewalk leading to the landing. I stared at the front door, at the windows to what could be his apartment. I didn’t want to leave.

I walked in the ditch beside the building for half an hour, counting dandelions, mistaking frogs for rocks, and scaring the occasional rabbit. A pit in my stomach kept me from leaving. After almost forty-five minutes, I had just decided to walk back to Brooke and Alex’s house when an engine roared to life somewhere behind the apartments. I quickly ran up to the side of the building to hide in case someone called me in for trespassing. Glancing around the corner, a red Chevy pickup sped out of the parking lot exit onto the main road. *Is that...?* The truck passed by where I was hiding, and the outline of Conner’s father was illuminated by the streetlamp. I watched him drive away down the center of the road, blowing past the stop sign. Once I was sure he wasn’t going to turn around, I ran up the steps and inside the apartment building. Numbered doors lined each side of the hallway, except where a staircase sat after door one. *Shit...* I pulled out my phone and called Conner’s number, watching all the doors, listening to the deafening silence. Just before the call would’ve gone to voicemail, he answered.

“Conner?”

Silence.

“Conner, what apartment are you in?” I couldn’t even hear him breathing on the other end.

“...One.” I crashed against the door and turned the handle: it was unlocked.

Inside, a kitchen and small dining space opened to my right, with a couch, armchair and TV set up on my left. Straight from the doorway, I could see an entrance to a bedroom, with two other doorways in the hall. Picture frames decorated the pale walls, but the generic stock photos they were sold with were still in every frame. There were no pictures of Conner or his father.

“Conner?” I called into the apartment.

“Back here,” he responded from down the hall. I headed toward his voice, finding him in the bathroom dabbing his left arm with a damp wad of toilet paper. He was bleeding.

“What the...” I stared at his arm in the harsh light, the bracelet of purple handprints around his wrist demanding my attention. The cut on his arm was around four inches long, although it was bleeding, it didn’t look very deep. My eyes burned with tears that I struggled to hold at bay. My hands reached out for his arm, wanting desperately to help, but I stopped them. “Is it okay?” I said softly, peering at his face that appeared unscathed. His dark teal eyes glittered with tears.

He placed the damp bloodied paper in my hand and spoke through gritted teeth: “Yeah.”

As I continued to lightly dab the cut, Conner brought out a box of Band-Aids and antibacterial ointment from the cabinet above the sink. I set the paper onto the counter and squeezed the ointment along his wound, using Q-tips to spread it out. Conner opened several bandages and handed each one to me as I placed them on his arm. Once I placed the last one down, I smoothed over the rest to make sure they weren’t loose. Up close, there were so many little scars scattered across his forearm, as if he got attacked by a

group of wild tomcats more than once.

The sound of Conner's voice pulled me out of a daze, and I realized that I was just petting his arm, tears streaming down my cheeks. I looked at his face riddled with concern over me as he took his arm back. *I* was the one without the giant wound, without thousands of scars, without a father that physically hurt me. I cried harder, angry that I let him come here, angry that he was so calm, angry that I was crying.

"Eva," he cooed. He carefully patted my head with his left hand like a younger sibling would to their distressed older sibling. The laugh I released sounded closer to a series of coughs, but Conner smiled anyway. I wiped my face with my hands, pulling myself back together.

"Come on." He spoke softly, leaning down to pick up his jacket I hadn't seen on the floor. He worked his right arm through the left sleeve, highlighting a long tear. "How good are you at sewing?"

I cleared my throat, feigning cheerfulness. "You're in luck! I used to make dresses for my Barbies."

"Better than nothing." He handed me his jacket and led me into the hallway, searching a closet until he found a spool of black thread with a needle. We settled in his living room on the deep blue loveseat, and I started to patch the sleeve. A single lamp by the large window lit the space.

"What happened?" I asked after a few minutes.

Conner sat facing me, hugging his knees to his chest. "I'm not allowed to leave at night. I have to take care of him when he's drunk, so he doesn't ruin the apartment instead." He watched the needle weave in and out of the leather. "I tried helping him into

bed, but he shoved me. Then decided he didn't shove hard enough and rammed me into his standing mirror." He gestured to his injured arm and deadpanned, "shard got me."

I sighed heavily. "When did he start...hurting you?" I laid the jacket on my lap, giving Conner my full attention. He inched his knees closer to his chest.

"A little after Mom left with Emma. I was seven."

I felt my heart shatter as I watched his fingers grip his biceps as he recalled buried memories.

"Have you told anyone?" I asked gently, although I was certain what the answer would be.

He closed his eyes and shook his head, "No." When he reopened his eyes, they appeared black in the low light; the lamp at an angle that couldn't penetrate their darkness. "I deserve this."

"Conner, no, no you don't."

"He's told me so many times that I did this, I ruined his life, I made them leave. It's all my fault," he nearly yelled, hands clutching his head. Stray tears slid down his cheeks as he curled into the corner of the loveseat. "When he stumbles through that door, sometimes I hope he'll end up killing me. Just to get it over with," he admitted weakly.

"Conner." My voice quaked with sorrow as I cried. I moved his jacket onto the floor and scooted closer to him, placing my hand on his knee. He unfurled slightly and in a second, I felt his thin arms wrap around me as I enveloped him in mine. He cried so quietly, the only way I knew was the jaggedness of his breaths as I rubbed his back. Between sobs he made me swear to keep it a secret, and I reluctantly agreed.

He sobbed against my shoulder for a long time. Even though my dad had

threatened to wring my neck before, he's never hit me. But, because I was afraid to get him angry, I've never seen him get to a point where yelling wasn't cutting it. At least I had Mom, Conner didn't have anyone anymore.

At some point, Conner fell asleep leaning against me on the loveseat, holding my hand. My brain couldn't fathom the unhappy home he'd been a part of his whole life. He'd said his parents had never gotten along, that Emma had practically raised him since their father was always working and mom was always out on the town. His mom then found a man with money and left with no warning. Conner had basically been on his own since he was seven. For a long time, I thought I had a happy family. But as I got older, Dad cared less and less about my hand-drawn birthday cards, about what books I read, or movies I watched. My grades were his only interest. *Now that I think about it, he doesn't care for anything Mom likes either.* He just wants to know if men hit on her at the nursing home. I rolled my eyes and thought of Paula. *I wonder who she really is,* I thought sarcastically.

Orange sunlight permeated the thin curtains, the sun just beginning to rise. The change in brightness caused Conner to stir, taking his hand back and rubbing his red puffy eyes.

"Morning sleepyhead," I said as he blinked to register his surroundings. Strands of dark hair stuck out in odd directions on the back of his head and I giggled. Without thinking, I patted down his rowdy hair. Realizing what I had done, we both stared at each other for a minute before bursting into laughter. A sound as grounding as wind rustling through leaves on a cool summer day.

"Did you have a little fun before...you know?"

“Yeah.”

“Good,” I sighed happily.

“Do you think the others are awake yet?” he asked while carefully stretching his arms over his head.

“Not likely, it’s barely seven-thirty.” I scoffed, checking my phone in case. No new messages. “I should probably go back though, so they don’t freak out.”

Conner agreed.

I picked up his jacket off the floor, catching the spool before it unraveled, and plopped it onto my thighs. “But first, I’ll finish this up,” I said, finding the needle and began to stitch as Conner went to wash his face.

“I look like shit,” he called from the bathroom. I snorted and nearly stabbed myself.

Once I finished patching the sleeve, Conner took it from me as I rose to leave. My stomach felt uneasy.

“I really don’t want to leave you here…”

“It’s okay, I’ll be okay,” he said. I wasn’t sure I believed him.

“If you need anything, you call me, okay?” I demanded gently, my mom instincts speaking through me.

“Okay.”

Before I walked out, I wrapped him in a hug again.

Brooke, Alex, Cristina, and Felix were still asleep when I got back to the house, so I attempted to sleep until everyone woke up. All of them bought the story that Conner got sick during the night and that I helped him home. Around noon, Mom picked me up.

“Did you have fun, punkin?” she said, sweetly. I suddenly wanted to spill everything to her. But I promised him I wouldn’t tell. Instead, I told her about how Felix won at Just Dance, how great our video project turned out, how nearly all of us cried at *Rise of the Guardians*.

“I’m glad you had fun.” She smiled and kissed the top of my head after we got home. Dad’s Yukon was gone, but I didn’t ask where he was. As she settled into her recliner, I put my bag in my room and brought out my laptop to show her our project. *I’m lucky that I have Mom.*

Chapter Five

Eva's Choice: "Somebody hear me, someone open up the door / Get me up off of this floor and stop the shaking, the shaking..."

"Room 138" by Asking Alexandria

Tuesday morning after the sleepover, Conner didn't ride the bus in the morning, which wasn't completely unusual because he didn't have a pattern for when he rode or not. But after what he told me Saturday, the fact that he wasn't answering my texts scared me. Yesterday he was completely fine. *Did something happen? Did his phone break?* When I got to the library, he wasn't there either. None of my friends had seen him. My hands trembled with anxiety.

Second block was Student Responsibility Block where we could travel to any other location for homework purposes. I was on my way to Mr. Carrey's classroom to finish coding an animation project since I didn't have a MAC computer at home. Cristina emerged into the same hallway and jogged over to me.

"Hey, people are talking in my SRB," she said.

"Talking about what?" I asked slowly, scrunching my eyebrows.

"Everyone's talking about Conner getting into a fight—"

"Wait, *Conner?*" I stopped in my tracks at the hallway crossroad. "Like English Conner, Conner Frost, that Conner?"

She nodded rapidly, "We literally don't know any other Conners."

My mind reeled, fingers tapping my hall pass. "He hasn't answered any of my texts, Cris." I continued walking. "Did anybody like see anything?"

"From what I heard, nobody actually witnessed anything. People are saying he

looks like he got beat up.”

“That’s...not good. Oh no,” I thought out loud. Cristina shrugged as we entered Mr. Carrey’s room. My pulse quickened in my throat. *Please be a misunderstanding*, I hoped. In order to look like I wasn’t panicking, I shifted my focus onto my animation for maybe twenty minutes before I literally couldn’t take it anymore. I slid my phone in my back pocket before asking Mr. Carrey if I could use the bathroom. I speed-walked to the nearest bathrooms past the cafeteria and glanced down the main hallway in case the Vice Principal was wandering around. Instead, I saw Conner leaving the office. He turned left down the hall away from me, not breaking eye contact with the floor. His black backpack hung off his right shoulder, hands buried into the pockets of his leather jacket.

“Conner, wait!” I called to him. He paused but didn’t turn around as I caught up beside him, then immediately continued walking in silence.

“I’m sorry I never answered you.”

I waved off his words and reached out to tap his left elbow, but his voice stopped my hand short.

“Don’t,” he pleaded quickly under his breath like a hiss of pain. I retracted my hand back to my side. We were almost to the end of the hall, near the parking lot doors and auditorium, but I had no idea where he was heading.

“Did he hurt you?” I whispered, watching the part of his face that wasn’t hidden by his hair. He stalled for a split second, but stayed quiet, walking closer to my side. Conner headed to the right into the open area outside of the auditorium, hidden behind the stairs among spare tables and chairs. He eased off his bookbag onto one of the dark wood tables, wincing at every movement of his left arm. Free of that burden, he finally

looked at me. My heart lurched. His bottom lip was swollen and cracked; the edges of skin crusted in blood. Two butterfly bandages held a cut closed on his right cheek. The rest of his face appeared oddly fine.

“Conner,” I murmured, “what happened?” I covered my mouth with my hand, resisting the urge to comfort him.

“Lots of Jack Daniel’s.” His laugh sounded hollow. I pouted at his response and moved to stand on his right side, leaning my head against his good shoulder.

“You didn’t call me,” I noted.

Conner sighed. “There wasn’t anything you could do, Eva.”

I huffed in frustration, hating how true his words were.

“Aren’t you going to get in trouble for being out here?” he asked, resting his head onto mine.

“Mr. Carrey thinks I’m in the bathroom, and I didn’t see the VP anywhere.”

Conner hummed in response and continued humming a song by Three Days Grace.

“Have you ever tried to defend yourself?”

Surprised at my question, he lifted his head up to look at me inquisitively.

“There’s no sense in trying to reason with him when he’s shitfaced. If I resist, the worse it is for me.”

“Jesus Christ,” I groaned, holding my head in my hands. *He must be so exhausted.*

“Don’t think about it too much, Eva.”

“How can I not? You’re my friend and he hurt you, Conner. He *hurts* you,” I replied firmly, extending my right hand out, palm up to emphasize my point. My

statement struck him, enough to make his eyes well up with tears. He turned his face up, blinking rapidly at the painted ceiling tiles. I stared at his teal eyes and understood why the skin around his injuries appeared fine: a layer of concealer or foundation hid the discoloration. *When did he apply that?*

“Eva.”

“What?”

“You should get back to class.”

I glanced at the clock, and sure enough, I’d been gone for more than ten minutes. I needed to get back before I’d be suspected for skipping. “Dammit. Are you gonna be okay? I could ask Brooke to take you home after school,” I offered.

“It’s just my shoulder, it’s fine.”

“If you need anymore,” I gestured around my face, “stuff, Brooke or Alex should have extra in their bags. Just ask them.”

“Okay.” He smiled as much as his swollen lip would allow.

“I need to tell Cristina—oh, shit, what do I tell her?” I whispered fervently.

“I fell off my bike.”

“Well, I guess.” I rubbed my cheeks, my nerves getting the better of me. *Deep breaths, deep breaths*, I repeated to myself.

“I’ll be okay. Go,” he said, playfully brushing my arm with his right elbow.

“Fine. I might call you tonight to check on you, so be sure to answer.”

“Promise,” he said, grimacing as he grabbed his bag.

“You better.” I returned his wave before dashing to Mr. Carrey’s room across the school. I stopped outside the classroom to catch my breath against the cool concrete

walls. I was upset that he didn't call, but he was right, I couldn't do anything. *I'm just a sixteen-year-old girl with zero upper body strength.* Pushing those thoughts away, I entered the room. No heads turned as I walked back to my MAC, except for Cristina. She tapped her finger furiously onto an imaginary watch on her wrist, then practically threw her arms around, nearly hitting the student to her left.

"Calm down," I whispered. Shushing her, I pulled out my phone and texted her that I talked to Conner—he had only fallen off his bike. As she read the message, I remembered when Conner told me about falling off his bike before...was that a lie?

Cristina believed it.

Before putting my phone back into my bag, I saw an unread text from Dad. *Strange*, I thought as I selected his message. It read 'hey babe im outside.' I narrowed my eyes in suspicion, as if my phone was playing a trick on me. *Well, I better show this to Mom later.*

After school, Mom picked me up to accompany her while grocery shopping at Walmart. *I'll have to do the dishes the next few times to make up for all the times she's walked the dogs for me lately*, I realized. Mom directed the shopping cart as I managed the list.

"When do you present your video project, Eva?" Mom asked, checking the milks for the latest expiration date.

"Tomorrow," I said, erasing milk from the list. "Everyone's going to be so shocked by Conner's acting; I can't wait."

"You did pretty good, too." She grabbed two bags of jelly beans as I grabbed a

bag of chocolate robin eggs from the seasonal aisle.

“Thanks, Mom.” I looked through the list and realized we didn’t get Au Jus.

I handed the list to Mom. “We forgot Au Jus; I’ll go get it.”

“Every time.” She sighed and continued toward the frozen food. I headed back for the gravy aisle. After overlooking the little jugs several times, I took one off the shelf and almost rounded the corner when I heard a familiar voice. It was Conner’s small, frightened voice. I peeked through the boxes of Cheez-Its on the side of the aisle. Conner and his father stood just over five feet from where I was.

“I thought I told you to fucking cover that shit up,” his father growled. Conner’s face wrinkled in pain as his father’s large hands gripped his arms hard. Paralyzed with fear, I couldn’t bring myself to look away.

“Did you hear me?” he whispered fiercely, shaking Conner’s frame.

“Ye-yes, sir...” Conner mumbled.

“Then why didn’t you fucking *hide them?!?*” his father nearly shouted, his face beet red. His hands released him, but Conner’s eyes squeezed shut as his father struck the left side of his face with a sickening smack. Tearing my eyes from the scene, my heart pounded against my chest. I wanted to call to him, I wanted to get him out of here—take him anywhere else. But I knew I couldn’t. I looked back to find Conner smoothing his jacket sleeves and holding his bright red cheek as he walked away. For five minutes I stood with my back against the shelves of crackers trying to calm my heart, waiting for them to create distance from me. I peeked around every aisle to make sure they weren’t there until I found Mom getting sliced ham from the deli.

“Did you get it?” she asked, setting the bag in the cart.

“Yeah.” I put the Au Jus next to the ham. “Are we done?”

“I think so,” she droned, double-checking the list. We made our way to a checkout without a line and ended up being on the opposite side of Conner and his father’s checkout. I accidentally stared too long and caught Conner’s attention. He seemed shocked to see me there, but I glanced at his father before making a phone with my hand, holding it up to my ear and mouthing *later* to him. He nodded. Even after Mom and I had left Walmart, the sound of that slap echoed in my ears.

Around eight in the evening I called him when I was in the field letting the labs out for the final time until tomorrow afternoon.

“Hello,” he answered, extending the ‘o’ sound.

I chuckled. “Hi.” I decided to not ruin his seemingly good mood by telling him what I saw earlier. There was a pause. I listened to him breathe calmly as I watched Rudy jump through the alfalfa bushes, looking for hidden rabbits. Reload watched him but went back to sniffing the ground she deemed more interesting.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Ah, I’m finishing *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*.”

“Ooh, don’t tell me anything I’ve still got three chapters left.”

“Okay. Did you finish that other one already?”

I did, and upon finishing it, I had a realization. The day we were assigned the creative project, when Conner and I talked about the books, he absolutely didn’t care for Alex Flinn’s novel. Nick, the main character, was abused by his father and unfortunately started to abuse his girlfriend. I understood why Conner wanted nothing to do with it, too

close to home. Not that *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* was much better with an abusive father, but it wasn't from the perspective of Sarah, so it offered more of a buffer. It was the better of two poisons, but not by much. "Yeah," I replied finally.

"What are you doing right now?"

"Walking the dogs in the field." I watched my feet impact the patches of dirt where grass refused to grow.

"Sounds fun."

"Oodles," I said sarcastically. We both laughed. Reaching the divide between alfalfa and mowed grass of the park, I parked myself on top of the lone red picnic table beside the aging swing set and slide, my feet on the bench and phone pressed to my ear.

"Hey, Conner?"

"Hmm?" I heard him turn a page.

"Have you ever looked for Emma?" I inquired. He exhaled deeply.

"I tried a couple years ago. But I didn't know where Mom moved to, or if she changed her name. I made a Facebook account and looked at every Emma Frost the search found, but there were so many blank and private profiles that I just gave up," he said.

"You haven't looked since then?" Rudy pranced over beside the table and slowly blinked at me, definitely ready for bed. Reload had her nose glued to one of the many holes in the field. The sun had almost fully set, indigo flooding the once orange sky.

"No...Do you think she'd be on there now?" There was the slightest hint of hope in his voice.

I hopped off the table and headed back to the yard, eager to investigate. "Maybe

try looking up your mom—there might be records online of a name change, if she had one.” Shuffling noises came through on Conner’s end, followed by rapid tapping of laptop keys.

I listened to his typing as I ushered the dogs back into their respective kennels, petting each of them.

“Oh.” Conner’s voice almost startled me as I rounded the back of the house.

“What? Did you find something?” I stopped in the front yard when he didn’t answer me. “Conner?”

“Mom’s dead.”

I brought a hand to my chest in shock, walking inside the house. *She’s dead?* I ran up the steps to grab my bookbag from the living room, smelling Mom’s shampoo as I zipped downstairs. I put Conner on speaker phone as I opened my laptop and froze over the keys. “What’s her name?” I asked hesitantly, wishing I didn’t.

“Hellen, two Ls,” he said quickly, voice cracking. I searched her name and the first result was an obituary dated December 3rd, 2012—just under two years ago. Clicking the link, an image of Hellen greeted me on the webpage. *She’s beautiful.* She had long black hair that twisted in loose curls around her face and shoulders, a wide smile showing off her white teeth. Her eyes seized me—they were Conner’s teal eyes accentuated with navy blue and gold eyeshadow.

“She’s so pretty, Conner.”

“Yeah,” he whispered.

Tearing my eyes away from her stare, I read through the short obituary. She died suddenly at thirty-six years old in Lauriam Falls. Before reading the rest, I opened a new

tab to find out the cause of death. There weren't any news articles, but a link to a Facebook post from a woman who must have been close with Hellen prior. She shared fond memories of her until mentioning that Hellen had been addicted to heroin. Hellen had died from a heroin overdose. *Oh god...*

"I think I found her name," Conner said, clearing his throat. I decided to keep the cause of Hellen's death to myself. If he wanted to know, he should find it for himself.

"Was it changed?"

"It says 'Emma Frost,' but the name Robinson is in parenthesis after that."

I typed Emma Robinson into Facebook's search bar and clicked on the first profile that listed Lauriam Falls as the hometown.

"This doesn't even mention my name." I heard him say sadly as I scrolled through pictures. On the third profile, I found a picture of a girl standing next to a woman that heavily resembled Hellen.

"Conner, is this Emma?" I sent the link to the picture through Messenger.

"Oh my god." He repeated the phrase over and over, muffled as if he was covering his mouth. "It's her," he finally said. Suddenly, a loud bang cut him off. "Dad's home, I'd better go Eva. Thank you. Thank you so much."

I told him to text me if he talked to her. After he hung up, I lay back on the dense carpet and smiled at the ceiling. *I can't believe we found her, we actually found her.*

"Eva? Where are you?" Mom called.

I sat up. "Be up in a sec!"

At the top of the stairs, she squinted her green eyes at me. "What were you doing down there?"

“Nothing bad, I swear.” I laughed at her sarcastic ‘uh huh.’ “Oh, right, Mom. I got a weird text from Dad today.”

“Weird text?” she echoed. I nodded and showed her the message from this afternoon.

“Isn’t he working today?” I asked, taking my phone back.

“He should be, yeah. Huh.” She thought for a moment. “Well, it definitely wasn’t meant for you, and he didn’t send anything to me.”

We shared a glance before she said, “We need to look on his phone.”

Chapter Six

Conner's Choice: "I've watched the weight of your world come down / And now it's your chance to move on / Change the way you've lived for so long / You find the strength you've had inside all along. / ...Take this life and make it yours..."

"Life Starts Now" by Three Days Grace

It was finally April 16th and the last day of English for the week before Good Friday and Easter Monday. It felt much more like a Friday than a Wednesday. During lunch, Conner told all of us about Emma, how he'd messaged with her basically all night. She was a sophomore at the University of Lauriam Falls, studying criminal justice. He left out his parents, but he radiated joy and the others hoped he would introduce us sometime. He agreed to.

In class, Mrs. Williams took our DVD excitedly and decided herself that our project would go first. I was slightly nervous for some reason, my leg bouncing underneath the table. Conner was beside me, as the rest of the class sat in their pairs. He wrung his hands in anticipation.

"We've probably got this the easiest because we don't have to get up and talk," he whispered to me. The cut on his cheek and lip had scabbed over, although his lip was still a little swollen. He wore the makeup just around his cheek wound today.

"You're right, but I'm still anxious."

"Me too, but we know it's good." We exchanged smiles and Mrs. Williams reminded everyone that it was presentation day, to be respectful, yadda yadda. She asked me to turn off the lights as she put the DVD in her laptop. When she hit play, everyone was quiet. I reached over and laid my hand on Conner's left arm softly as the opening

track began. He eyed my hand before patting it reassuringly. Baffled at his transformation, some of our classmates glanced from the video to Conner and back. I laughed internally. When Conner's character started his descent into madness, people's mouths hung open in awe. I was so proud of him. There weren't many bloopers, but everyone stayed nearly silent. When the credits rolled, Cristina started clapping and the rest of the class followed suit. Conner and I high-fived.

"That's a solid A," I said to him.

"Excuse you, that's an A plus."

That'll make Dad happy for sure. "You're right."

Mrs. Williams called on different groups throughout class. When it came to Cristina and Tanner's turn, I heard her disgruntled huff as they both came to the front of the room. They had made a diorama of the prisoner's cell from "The Pit and the Pendulum." Although she complained so much about her partner, their project turned out pretty good. A few pairs did short skits of their stories, and most of the rest made story plot posters—with and without basic art skills.

I joined Conner outside with the others waiting for the bus once chemistry was over.

"How was chem?" he asked.

"I'll be really lucky if I get an A on that test," I admitted, stretching my arms high.

"You could've taken regular chem, but nooo," he joked.

I stuck my tongue out at him. "It was honors chem or bust, Dad's orders." I

shrugged.

“What is the deal with your dad?”

“Basically, my worthiness as his daughter is determined by my grades.” I picked at my nails. *I should paint these again.*

“You have straight A’s though.” Conner tilted his head like a puppy.

“That’s where the requirements start.” I sighed. “Straight A’s, must obey his every whim and treat him like a king, never argue because he is always right, have no interests that he deems a ‘waste of time;’ would you like me to continue?” I chuckled bitterly as he shook his head no. I used to love swimming and being a part of the local team meant I had to participate in meets. I quickly learned that if I didn’t win my specific heat, to him that said I wasn’t trying. He only ever came to one meet to watch me swim. I had gotten either second or third place, but he quoted Ricky Bobby from *Talladega Nights* to me: “If you’re not first, you’re last.” It didn’t take long for my love of swimming to dissolve and I quit the team altogether.

“That sounds exhausting.”

“Yeah...yeah it’s not fun.” The loud rumble of the bus’s engine came into earshot and we all started gathering by the curb. “Like, his life wasn’t the greatest, and I get that, but he’s not doing a spectacular job, either.”

“But he thinks he’s doing great?” Conner plopped into the first seat by the door and I sat behind him.

“Bingo.” I pulled my jacket sleeves up to my elbows, letting the seventy-degree air cool my arms. “He just doesn’t care about anything I like, it’s always about money or being the best.”

“That’s why he won’t let you be an author?”

“It doesn’t matter that writing makes me happy, it doesn’t make lots of money, therefore, it’s not an option for me.” Though it was nice talking to Conner about my dad, I felt bad considering his was worse than mine. “Sorry I’m complaining a lot,” I said.

“Shh, this is what friends do. You’ve helped me so much, it’s the least I can do.” His juniper-blue eyes gleamed. My eyes burned as tears tried to form.

I fanned my face with my hands to stop them. “You’re gonna make me cry, Conner.” He started fanning my face too, making me laugh. We switched buses at the elementary school and continued the journey home.

“What about your mom?”

“She’s under the same terms and conditions as I am. He doesn’t do anything for her, doesn’t care about what she likes.” I paused, folding my arms on the back of Conner’s seat. “Lately, now he’s been asking her stupid questions, like he suspects her of cheating. All she does is work and cater to his every whim. He’s the one that talks about this Paula lady all the time.”

“Sounds like projection to me,” Conner concluded. I stared at him. “Projection is when someone projects their negative qualities onto other people to make them feel guilty, to shift the blame onto someone other than themselves. You should take Psychology Today, it’s a great class.”

“Well, holy shit I better do that.”

Dad’s Yukon was parked in the driveway when I got off the bus. *Did he get an early Easter break?* I asked myself. The dogs were spinning in their kennels, demanding

food. I hurried inside. As soon as I stepped through the door, Dad's voice boomed from his recliner: "Hurry up and get out there!" *Oh, he's not happy at all.* I kicked off my shoes and dropped my bag by the stairs, not even bothering to change into comfier clothes like I normally do. Mom was in the kitchen prepping what looked to be hamburgers. We were quiet as I put water in the dog bowls, and she formed patties with ground beef.

I exhaled in relief at being outside as I served the labs their dinner. As they ate, I shuffled my music, starting on "Props & Mayhem," my favorite Pierce the Veil song. *I wonder why he's so angry today.* I refilled their buckets of water and cleaned out their kennels and finally let them out into the field. The alfalfa was blooming, attracting butterflies and welcoming me to start my hunt for blue blossoms. The colors ranged from all shades of purple to white and yellow and pinks, and then the elusive blues—even combinations of those colors. Whenever I found particularly pretty blooms, I took pictures. Almost all the pictures on my phone were taken in the field, of the grass, the trees or the sky. I stayed out longer with the dogs than usual, just so Dad couldn't complain that their walk wasn't long enough. The house smelled like cooking meat when I came back inside. Returning to the kitchen to wash the bowls, I noticed Dad was on his laptop. That usually meant he would ignore most everything else. And he did, until after we ate supper.

"You get a grade back on that project yet?" His voice chilled my bones. *Oh, fuck.*

I left the bowls to dry in the sink and went to pick up my bag by the stairs and take it to its natural spot beside the couch. "No, we just presented them today."

"Who all helped you with that project?" He questioned, raising his eyes to mine. I

looked away to fish *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* out of my bag.

“Conner was my partner; Cristina, Felix and Brooke helped us with it.”

“Isn’t Brooke that satanic girl?”

Satanic? “She’s not satanic, she just likes the color black,” I defended, wrinkling my forehead. The hamburger sizzled loudly in the kitchen.

“Whatever, you need to hang out with better people. That Cristina girl, too.”

“What’s wrong with Cristina?” I glared at him, baffled that he was complaining about my friends. *I thought he dropped that after elementary school, but I guess not.*

“What number boyfriend is she on now? It’s a miracle she hasn’t gotten pregnant.”

I couldn’t believe what he was saying. “She is my best friend. Felix is only her third boyfriend. Stop talking about her like that.”

“Koby, that’s enough,” Mom said from the kitchen, rinsing the greasy pan.

Unfazed by my rising anger and Mom’s warning, he shut his laptop and continued. “Who’s this Conner kid? Your mom told me about him.”

“Conner was my English partner, he’s my friend.” I clenched my right fist against my leg, so he wouldn’t see. He laughed as he leaned over to put his laptop on the floor.

“Oh yeah? Real nice kid? He’s probably just trying to get into your pants.” He laughed widely, exposing the wad of chew in his left cheek.

“Koby—!”

“*Shut the fuck up!*” I screamed at him, standing up.

“Don’t you fucking raise your voice at me,” he countered, voice dripping with malice, putting his footrest down.

“Just shut the fuck up about my friends!” I yelled, grabbing my phone and storming out of the house. I rushed past Rudy and Reload back into the field, heading for the trio of pine trees at the end of the mowed section. Arriving at the trees, I started my music again and screamed along with Andy to “Perfect Weapon.” After screaming my rage for a few more songs and sending a rant text to Cristina, I sat down on the cool grass and looked up at the sky. The tops of the trees made it look like I was surrounded, guarded. Loose cotton clouds drifted by the opening to the sky. I snapped a picture from my perspective, then experimented with focus and angles for half an hour, moving on to the four singular trees that lined the border of the alfalfa. Once an hour had passed, I reluctantly headed back to the house. The TVs were the only sounds I could hear. Mom watched me sit back on the couch. Dad had relocated to the master bedroom.

“You need to go apologize,” she said. I wanted to pretend that she hadn’t said anything, but I couldn’t.

“I am not apologizing.”

“Eva, I know—”

“Mom, you heard what he said! Why should I have to say sorry?” I tried to keep my voice hushed.

“Because he will make it worse, you know that,” she said softly. I groaned internally, knowing she was right. If I didn’t admit “my” wrongs, then his tempter would only get worse, and not to mention Mom unfortunately shared the room with him. “I’m sorry, honey, he caught me trying to look at his messages.”

I forced myself off the couch once again and slowly walked to the bedroom, Mom kissing my hand apologetically as I passed her. Dad was snug under the comforter, the

TV flashing blue light all over the room. I stood next to the bed, arms at my sides, stomach rolling. *For Mom*, I persuaded myself.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you.” My brain desperately wished to eat those words, to take them back. He shifted his eyes from the TV to my face and plastered a victorious smile onto his rotten mouth.

“Love you,” he said in his sickly-sweet voice that he used whenever we submitted to his authority. Or admitted to things that were never our faults in the first place.

“Love you, too,” I lied.

I explained the horror story from last night to my friends in the library Thursday morning, leaving out my dad’s specific comments.

“If he’s got something to say about me, he can say it to my fucking face,” Cristina spat. She hardly ever swears, only when she’s really pissed.

“You should’ve kicked his ass,” Felix said, thumb stroking Cristina’s shoulder to calm her down.

“Believe me, I wanted to.”

“I’m really glad that I haven’t met him,” Conner added. All of us at the table agreed.

“On a less bitter note, what are you guys doing over break?” Brooke held her chin in her hands, peering at all of us.

“Sleeping,” Alex piped up. Brooke flopped her hand at her sister, already aware of her plans.

“My family’s going camping,” Felix informed us, while Cristina announced that

she was going with him.

“I’m gonna try to not aggravate my dad again.”

“Conner, what about you?” A giant smile blossomed on his face in response to Brooke asking.

“Emma’s gonna come down this weekend,” he revealed. All of us gasped and declared his break as the best one. “I’m really excited.”

Seeing Conner so excited melted my heart; he deserved that happiness.

Classes whizzed by, which was both a blessing and a curse. I wasn’t looking forward to being home alone with Dad until Mom got off work at six. *Why did he go on holiday so early? We don’t even do anything for Easter.*

Conner didn’t ride the bus after school, which made it difficult to relax without his company. Coming up the hill to my house, Dad’s Yukon was absent. Relief flooded my body as I celebrated in my head.

Unfortunately for me, Mom worked Good Friday too, and Dad returned from wherever he was around noon. I had just woken up and was eating cereal when he got back.

“Hey, Dad,” I greeted casually, as if Wednesday had never happened and he wasn’t a cheater.

“Hi, pumpkin.”

He instructed me to start a load of laundry when I was done eating before getting into the shower. *Back to normal.* Taking the laundry basket from the bathroom, I stopped to pick out the dirty clothes from his duffle bag. I picked out the smelly socks and crumpled shirts. As I was about to straighten up, I noticed his wedding ring sitting on the

bottom of the bag. *Has he not worn that all week?* I left it where it was and went downstairs to start the washer.

He spent hours browsing his online fishing forums as I watched Food Network and occasionally went downstairs for the laundry. When Mom's car pulled up, I thanked the universe because I wouldn't be stuck in loops of *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* and *Pioneer Woman*. Mom came up the steps and emptied her scrubs pockets of pens and scissors into the miscellaneous change bowl on the ledge behind the recliners.

"What's been going on?" she asked, draping her jacket over the railing.

"Nothing really," I answered.

"What's for supper?" Dad chimed in, closing his laptop.

"We've got pork chops in the fridge, I think," Mom said from the bathroom. After changing out of her scrubs, she headed into the kitchen to make supper.

"Go help your mother," Dad ordered.

So, I went to the kitchen to observe because I refused to handle the meats. The look of raw meat made me nauseous. I turned on the stove and set out a pan for her to use. When I had her brief attention, I pointed at my ring finger, pretending to take a ring off.

"Eva." Dad's voice made me freeze, afraid that he saw me signaling to Mom.

"Have you thought more about college?"

Oh no. I moved stiffly towards the kitchen table so he could see me, his cold blue eyes already locked onto me. My hands threatened to shake, already clammy. Suddenly, Conner's words from the sleepover repeated in my head—it's your life. I stood tall before answering him, "I want to be an author, or an editor. Writing is something that I love, and

I'm good at it."

His face turned red, and he scoffed. *Another wrong answer.* "Do you really think that makes any money? This is as bad as wanting to be an artist!" he nearly shouted. His faded blue recliner groaned as he put the footrest down, spitting a wad of tobacco into the garbage beside his chair.

"Money isn't everything, Dad." My voice trembled.

"You'd starve either way. You can't waste that intelligence God gave you, Eva, come on." He sneered before getting to his feet. My knees threatened to give out.

"It's my life," I whispered softly, hoping he didn't hear.

"What?" *Fuck. Well, it's now or never.*

"I said, it's my life. If I want to be a writer, then I'm gonna be a writer."

He narrowed his icy stare, towering over me. "Listen. You've got one year until college. If you waste your brain like that I'll be disappointed in you."

His poisonous words seeped into my skin, the mint on his breath almost making me gag. He turned into the kitchen to coil his arms around Mom like a snake, as if he hadn't just practically disowned me. I felt anger swarming in my stomach, so I headed back to the couch to try and relax before I said something stupid.

At the coffee table, I heard him ask Mom about the male doctors at work again. I stopped walking and listened. When Mom denied it, he asked again, stepping halfway out of the kitchen.

"Why do you keep asking that?" I said aloud, turning to face him. *Oops, there goes my last straw.*

"What?" His face feigned innocence, to make it seem like I misheard.

“Why do you keep accusing her of cheating?”

“I’m not accusing her.”

“Right. Then why even bring it up?” He didn’t answer, the wrinkles in his forehead deepened.

“Another question: where’s your ring?” I gestured to my hand. *No backing out now.*

“It fell off at work, so I put it in my bag. I need to get it tightened.”

“You know what I learned recently? If a partner accuses the other of cheating, it’ll most likely turn out that the accuser is cheating.” Glancing at his chair, I picked up his phone. *Here we go.*

“Go ahead and look, I’ve got nothing to hide,” he stated confidently, so I would give in and drop the subject.

“Let’s see.” A pop from the kitchen indicated Mom had turned off the stove, watching me. She nodded for me to go ahead. I swiped open Dad’s phone—there was no passcode—and went to his messages. The most recent contact was, as I had guessed, Paula. “What does Paula have to say?” I grazed over the messages. “Mom.”

Mom left the kitchen and took his phone. Multiple messages were explicit, with pictures, making me nauseated. “Get out,” she stated sternly.

Dad’s face burned red. “You can’t kick me out, this is *my* house.”

“I don’t think so. I pay the mortgage, so it’s my house. Get the fuck out.”

My chest almost felt lighter hearing Mom put her foot down.

“Fine.” His voice rumbled ominously, as thunder boomed in the distance. In the next second, Dad had crossed the living room, standing directly in front of me. He

plucked his phone from Mom's hand and took hold of my forearm. He gripped hard and yanked me toward the stairs.

"Mom!" I screamed as he pulled me outside. The sky swarmed with storm clouds, rain falling at an ever-quickening pace. Trying to pull away felt like my bone would snap in half. Dad covered my mouth with his free hand and dragged me to the back of the Yukon. Mom burst out of the house screaming into her phone, as he shut me in the vehicle and hopped into the driver's seat, igniting the engine.

"What the fuck are you doing?!" I screamed at him, pushing on the back doors, the latch refusing to budge. He floored the accelerator, causing me to lurch sideways into his tackle boxes. *Fuck, I'm going to die, he's going to kill me*, my brain screeched.

"You just had to open your fucking mouth," he grumbled, blowing past the stop sign onto Dakota Street. "She's not gonna leave me without you."

My heart pounded as fast as the rain pelted the windshield. I struggled to climb over the backseat as he flew up the steep hill. He kept locking all the doors as soon as I managed to unlock one. We were fast approaching the apartment buildings, and I got an idea. I jumped into the passenger seat and unlocked the door. Before I could open it, Dad grabbed my elbow and squeezed, crushing veins under his fingers like dried leaves. Screeching, I kicked his knee off the pedal, and bit down hard on his hand until he let go. Once he did, I threw my entire bodyweight into the passenger door and launched myself into the ditch, catching the edge of the road. I scrambled up and sprinted as the Yukon skidded to a stop and his door opened. The rain felt like ice on my skin as I ran to the back of the third building to hopefully confuse him and keep him away from Conner. I ran as fast as my bare feet could on the wet grass, barely breathing as I entered the first

building. Police sirens blared by on their way to the house. Finally, at apartment number one, I pounded on the door with my fists.

“Conner, it’s me, it’s Eva. Please open the door!” I sobbed, leaning against the wood, breathing like a fish out of water. *Please tell me his dad isn’t home.* As the door opened, I fell inside onto the floor. Conner shut and locked the door, then tried to help me up. I didn’t know if I had truly lost my dad outside, but I attempted to stay as quiet as possible as Conner supported me to his room. I collapsed onto the carpet, cradling my bruising arm, sobbing uncontrollably. Conner brought towels to dry me off, but I had curled into the fetal position, shaking violently. My brain couldn’t process what had just happened.

Conner did his best at wrapping a towel around my head without much cooperation on my part. He pulled his black comforter off the bed and over my body, tucking it in around my feet and shoulders. Hazily watching him, I noticed that the cut on his left arm had turned pink. *Almost healed,* I thought. The last thing he did was lay in front of me, hair just touching my head, and sang “The Mortician’s Daughter” by Black Veil Brides—my song. He sang until I either fell asleep or passed out.

Waking up from that fiasco was the worst. It hurt to move, it hurt to breathe. I sat up slowly, feeling as though my entire body had suffered one major Charley horse. The room was dark, just barely lit by a small desk lamp. My clothes were damp and uncomfortable, clinging to my body for warmth I no longer had.

“C-Conner,” I whispered, gently pushing on his shoulder to wake him. His eyes cracked open before fully sitting up.

“Hey, hey. How are you feeling?” he asked, helping me take the towel off my

head.

“Kinda like I got hit by a bus, just with less broken bones,” I admitted as he helped me stand. My right leg ached in several places making it difficult to walk. Conner guided me into the bathroom, giving me a basic rundown of the shower, and brought me a clean towel and a dry set of clothes to change into once I was done. The warm water felt like a dream, soothing my sore muscles and bringing my internal temperature back to its normal state. I never wanted to leave. While patting my body dry, I grazed a raw patch of skin on the side of my right calf. *I must've scraped it on the road.* Only a small area bled, so I borrowed a bandage and ointment from the cabinet to patch it up. The bruises on my left arm looked like a terrible watercolor tattoo of purple roses.

Conner gave me sweatpants and a sweatshirt to wear, both surprisingly big and comfy. I exited the bathroom and joined Conner in the living room watching the evening news. *It must be around ten, then.*

“Do you want some hot chocolate or something?” he offered, heading into the kitchen. I made a face before agreeing.

Conner laughed at my expression. “What was that?”

“I don't really like hot drinks, but it'd be better for me if I had one,” I explained.

“Okay,” he droned, amused.

I cozied into the corner of the loveseat, pulling the sweatshirt over my knees, and watched the weatherman talk about the surprise thunderstorm. Earlier in the day, the forecast had predicted clear skies. After a few minutes, Conner returned with two cups of cocoa and a bag of mini marshmallows. He handed me a mug and the marshmallows before walking to the patio windows and peeking past the curtains to the road. *Dad must*

be gone. The chocolatey steam smelled delicious, but when I took a sip, I shook my head at the taste.

“Never tastes as good as it smells.”

“You’re something else.” Conner chuckled before taking a drink and sat down.

“The police are investigating a potential kidnapping from a few hours ago,” the female news anchor reported as pictures of me and my dad appeared on screen. My mouth fell open, surprised it was on the news.

“Kidnapping?” Conner repeated, staring at me in shock.

I held my mug of cocoa with both hands, stroking the ceramic with my thumb. “You and I both weren’t expecting that to ever happen.”

“Well, how did—how...” Conner struggled to even ask how it came to that.

“Just after Mom got home, he started asking about college and pretty much disowned me after I defended myself. Then he started his bullshit with Mom and...” I paused. “I just snapped. For a while, Mom and I suspected he was fooling around and when you mentioned projection—everything made sense. And whaddya know, he’s a cheating bastard.” A sudden chill spread goosebumps over my skin, so I pulled my arms out of the sweatshirt sleeves and crossed them over my chest. Conner gestured for me to continue.

“He threw me in the car like a fish in his live well.” I shivered, remembering how calm he had been, as if he’d planned it. “He was going this direction and I’m just so glad you were home,” I cried, wiping my nose with my fingers.

Conner reached for the Kleenex box on the glass coffee table and offered it to me.

“Thanks.” I put the box on the floor and blew my nose.

“Here.” Conner offered me his phone. “Text your mom; she’s probably worried sick.”

Reluctantly, I took his phone and sent a brief “I got away I’m ok” text to Mom then gave the phone back.

“When is Emma coming down?” I asked, swiftly shifting the focus off me.

“Tomorrow morning-ish, she had to work at the University today.”

“Are you excited?”

He smiled. “Yeah.”

“What are you guys gonna do? Is she picking you up here?” I leaned my head onto the back of the loveseat.

“We’re meeting at Hitchcock Park, by the pool.”

“Are you gonna tell her about your dad?” His face fell and I regretted asking. He took a drink of his cooled cocoa before responding.

“I’m not sure. If she asks about him, I might have to...”

With great effort, I moved closer and patted his shoulder. “I’m sure you’ll have fun.”

He nodded.

We wasted several hours watching *Seinfeld* reruns, laughing at Kramer’s eccentric behavior and antics. When our laughter turned into various types of sighs and yawns, Conner suggested we try to sleep. Putting my legs down, I pushed down on each foot to determine how well I could walk and figured I would be okay on my own. That didn’t stop Conner from walking closely beside me, just in case. I turned the light on in his room as he took a box filled with blankets out of the hall closet.

“There should be a bunch of pillows in my closet, grab some of those,” he instructed, unfolding and laying out a floral comforter. I opened his closet and, sure enough, there was a pile of pillows sitting on the floor.

“Any reason you have so many?” I asked curiously, taking two larger pillows and a smaller decorative one before shutting the doors.

“I sleep in there sometimes when Dad’s not home,” he replied.

I dropped my arms in surprise, both at his response and how casual he made it sound. “Oh.”

“Does this look okay?” Conner gestured to the layered blanket-bed beside his desk. I hobbled over and tossed the pillows at the “head” of it.

“It’s great, thank you.” I lowered my sore body onto the blankets as he climbed into his bed, setting his phone on the nightstand. All the walls were navy blue, even the ceiling. Cuddling the smaller pillow against my chest, I stared at his ceiling covered in glow-in-the-dark stars.

“Where is your dad?” I questioned.

“At a bar. He normally stays out until mid-afternoon on Saturdays, we should be fine.”

“Okay.”

Once he flipped off the light, the air vent in his room woke up, softly blowing warm air against the top of my head. The quiet humming noise lulled me to sleep.

Chapter Seven

Eva & Conner's Choice: "A red river of screams / Underneath / Tears in my eyes / Stars in my black and blue sky / Underneath / Under my skin / Underneath the depths of my sin / Look at me / Now do you see?"

"Underneath" by Adam Lambert

A sound like something the size of a bear slamming into a wall came from the living room, instantly snapping Conner and me out of peaceful sleep. He turned on the light as we both sat up.

"Don't open it," I whispered, watching him climb out of bed.

"I have to. Here, you should call your mom," he said, handing me his phone. "I can sneak you out after I get him to bed."

"I'm not leaving you again."

"Eva, please..."

"I'll stay in here—just shut the door, so he doesn't see me."

He hesitated at the doorway, then his father slammed against the door again, and he shut me in. I gripped his phone, listening to their muffled conversation. After a few minutes, everything seemed okay, but their voices never came closer. *What's going on?* Keeping his phone in hand, I crawled to the door and pressed my ear to it. His father slurred up a storm of unintelligible words while Conner remained silent. Then something hit a wall. I pressed harder against the door, bracing my arms on it, hoping it wasn't Conner.

"Dad, let's get you to bed, come on." He spoke calmly.

"Hellen ssshould haff taken youu," his father said loudly.

“I know, Dad. I’m sorry.”

The response was something like “you’re not sorry” in a deep growl, much like what a T-rex would sound like if it was drunk and spoke English. Another growling noise came from his father, followed by Conner yelping. My heart pounded. My hand leapt to the doorknob, but I didn’t turn it.

There was lots of shuffling until his father shouted, “It’s your FUCKING FAULT!” so loud that anybody in the apartment hall could’ve heard. Then things started breaking and hitting the walls frequently. I dialed 911 as my hands trembled. A woman answered.

“911, where is your emergency?”

“I-I don’t know the address. It’s the first apartment building on North Dakota Street, before the Musick horse farm. It’s apartment one.” My teeth chattered as she spoke the location back to me.

“What is your name?”

“Eva. Eva Spring.” The operator repeated it and I confirmed.

“All right, Eva. What’s going on there?”

“This is my friend’s place; his dad is beating him.” A loud scream from Conner seeped through the door, coupled with a heavy impact noise.

“Beating him?”

“Yes, he just screamed, please send somebody.” The blood drained from my hands.

“What’s his name?”

“Conner Frost. I don’t know his dad’s first name.”

“Conner Frost, okay. Is there anyone else there with you?”

“No, I’m hiding in his room.”

“You said his father was beating him?”

“I can hear things breaking and Conner screaming. He’s abused him for a long time. Is someone coming?”

“There is an officer nearby on his way. I’m connecting a medic now.”

“Okay.” I retold the medic everything I said to the woman, chewing my nails. I heard another impact noise along with shattering of glass. Conner let out a piercing shriek over oncoming sirens and I couldn’t stay in his room anymore. I went to the window, in hopes of flagging down the cars, but there was a screen in place that required a screwdriver to remove. I cursed into the phone. The operator had heard the scream and told me to be safe. But I opened the door and stepped into the hallway to Conner’s father screaming into his face above the remains of the coffee table. I hung up and put his phone in my sweatshirt pocket, running to the front door and outside. The cop car slowed when it saw me, and I pointed frantically to the apartment. He stopped the car in the street and he and his partner headed inside, me behind them. By the time we got inside, Conner’s father had him up against the bloodied wall by his throat. His father didn’t respond to the officer’s requests to let him go, and after several more warnings, one officer used his taser gun on him while the other rushed to grab Conner. I dropped to my knees in tears as EMTs from the ambulance rushed inside.

“Miss,” a voice spoke above me. I glanced up at a female officer and tried to stop crying. It didn’t work.

“Are you hurt anywhere? What’s your name?” she asked, kneeling beside me like

I was a child.

“I’m okay. My name’s Eva,” I told her through sobs. An EMT came out and returned with a female EMT, both carrying each end of a collapsed stretcher into the apartment.

“I’m Officer Ashley. Can you stand?” I nodded and she helped me up. The EMTs wheeled Conner out to the ambulance, the officers still inside handcuffing his father. Ashley led me outside and down the concrete steps, her steady hand between my shoulder blades.

“What happened tonight?” Although she was very kind, I was tired of saying it, but I told her anyway.

“His father came home drunk and started yelling at him about his divorce and just...attacked him.”

“Has this happened before?”

“He told me it started when he was seven. Last weekend he’d gotten a cut on his arm, and Monday he had a busted lip and sore shoulder.”

“Are there any family members we could contact?”

“Uh, well he was supposed to meet his estranged sister today, Emma Robinson? Hold on,” I paused taking his phone out of my pocket as Ashley pulled a small notepad and pen from her back pocket. Swiping to open his phone, I went to contacts and looked up her name and read the number to the officer.

“What about you, your parents?”

I hesitated in answering. *Would she let me go with Conner if I tell her who I am?*

“My mom is Diane Spring, I’m her daughter.”

Recognition flashed in her eyes. She immediately spoke into her walkie, that she had the ten-sixty-five then my name and to contact my mom.

“Can I go with him?” I asked, pointing to the EMTs loading Conner into the back of the ambulance.

“Let’s go ask.” She guided me over to the vehicle and asked if I could tag along. The two remaining EMTs helped me into the back and directed me to a singular seat across from the bench. Conner groaned as the doors shut and we started moving. His eyes fluttered closed after being open for only a few seconds each time. He turned his head in my direction, black hair a mess on the stretcher, and tried to smile at me.

“Hi, you’re gonna be okay,” I whispered to him. His not-swollen-shut eye was a dull Turkish blue, bright amongst all the bruises and blood on his face, the stark violet handprints on his neck. *How are you even alive after that?* I held his hand as gently as possible to avoid straining anything in his arm. Fighting the urge to cry again, I held strong for him. Just as he had done for me, I began to sing “Carolyn” by Black Veil Brides softly to him. I wasn’t a singer by any means, and I felt bad for the EMTs who had to listen to my voice. But when Conner sang to me earlier, it helped me calm down, it distracted my mind. Whether he was listening or falling asleep, I couldn’t tell.

People magazine’s article on Jennifer Lawrence couldn’t keep my brain’s attention as I sat in the waiting area of the hospital. My feet froze to the linoleum floor in just a pair of thin shoe covers provided on arrival. I worried about his injuries. His father had broken their coffee table with his body, the blood on the wall.

“Eva?” I was startled to hear my name, used to the faint whirs of distant machines

and murmurs of nurses. Mom came running at me with Officer Ashley at her heels.

“Oh, my baby my baby. I’ve been so worried! Why are you here, are you hurt? Why didn’t you call me?” She spouted questions at me as she squeezed me against her body, afraid to ever let me go.

“Mom, you’re crushing me,” I croaked, wrapping my arms around her and snuggling into her smell of home.

“Do you want to head to the station to make your statements?” Ashley asked me. I peeled myself off Mom.

“I don’t want to leave until I know he’s okay…” I glanced at Mom’s frazzled face, her thin hair hastily up in a clip.

“Well, we can wait. It’s better to do it right away while the memories are prominent.”

“When I know he’s okay.”

After what felt like forever, Conner was moved into a room in the ICU. He had several bruised ribs, lacerations on his back from the glass—only a few of which required stitches—and a broken left arm.

As Mom and I left the hospital with Ashley, I asked her: “What’s going to happen now?”

“Child Protective Services are on their way to assess the situation, which your statement could help with.”

“Did you call his sister?”

“Emma is also on her way.”

I exhaled and sat back, reassured. “He’s not going to go back there, right?”

Ashley peeked at me through her rearview mirror. “I hope not.”

It was almost noon by the time I could go into Conner’s room. Ashley provided a copy of my official statement to the CPS caseworker, who stayed in the room with him. He was incredibly drowsy and slipped in and out of consciousness often. When he was awake, it was difficult for him to talk, his voice hoarse and broken. At some point, I dozed off in the uncomfortable chair beside him.

And then Emma arrived.

She was talking with Ashley, Mom, and the caseworker in the hall. I rubbed my eyes and neck.

“She’s here,” Conner said with great effort. I slid my chair back and wandered toward their group.

“Emma?” I said. Her tall figure turned around. *Whoa*. She resembled Hellen in almost every way: long black hair with a wine-colored sheen under the light—two small braids just above her pierced ears tied with a ponytail on the back of her head—vibrant teal eyes topped with flashy dark eyeshadow. She wore a Three Days Grace tour t-shirt and turquoise skinny jeans. *I like her already*.

“You!” she exclaimed right before embracing me, lifting my feet off the ground. I made a surprised noise and she put me down, hands on my shoulders. “Thank you for helping my brother.”

“Ah, yeah. He’s awake right now.” I gestured my thumb into the room. She took my hand and let me walk her inside. Once she saw him, she let go of my hand to cover her mouth in shock at his appearance. His entire face was puffy and mottled with purples

and reds and yellows.

“Emma,” Conner wailed, straining his right arm for her. She immediately grabbed his shaking hand in hers, weaved her other arm under his head onto her shoulder. He sobbed hard, coughing and sucking in air, grimacing every time. I wiped my cheeks, rejoined the group in the hall, and hugged Mom as she and Officer Ashley discussed lawyers until Conner’s crying died down.

Although our lives were a little up in the air now, I knew we’d be okay.

APPENDIX

Artist's Statement

Plot Summary: Eva Spring is struggling to adhere to her father's rather high and specific expectations in her junior year of high school. One morning, she encounters a boy with haunted eyes that she can't quite place, until they become project partners in English class. As they delve into their project, Conner and Eva grow close, and Eva notices things in her life and Conner's that don't seem quite right.

Character Sketches: Eva Spring is the protagonist of this story, a junior in high school at sixteen. She has long brown hair and green eyes. Eva is very much a fictional version of me, as many of her experiences within the story are heavily inspired by my life.

Evangeline is her full first name because of *Nanny McPhee* and *Princess and the Frog*.

Conner Frost is the secondary protagonist, with longish black hair swept to the left and constantly wears a leather jacket to cover his injuries. At seven, his mother took his older sister Emma and filed for divorce, inevitably leaving Conner alone with his father who was not a happy man. Conner endured abuse for nine years at this point in the story. His name originated from a boyfriend quiz result that scarred me in high school, so I felt compelled to give this name a better end.

Cristina Black is a character created by my best friend Chelsea back in high school, with a signature braid and blue eyes. She has a shorthaired German Shepherd named Phoenix and is in a relationship with Felix.

Felix is almost a "better" version of Conner, one that lived a better life, with longish blond hair and pale blue eyes. In the original plot, Felix indeed was like Conner

and Eva, with an unfaithful father that hit him when he confronted him about it. He has a red husky named Knight that is his family dog.

Brooke and Alex are sisters. Brooke's backstory for the original plot was that she lost her entire family to a house fire when she was little and was adopted by Alex's mother. Brooke is a motherly figure while Alex likes to be rebellious. They both have medium-length black hair, Brooke has gray eyes and Alex has blue eyes. Alex's original name was Ace, inspired by the persona of my friend Allison, her ideal image of herself.

Koby Spring is Eva's father, and my "father's" real name. I struggled a lot with giving a name to this character, and in my own life I've replaced his name with "Voldemort" in conversations. There wasn't a name that could fit—in a way, I felt he didn't deserve a cover name. There are only a few exaggerated events from my life in this story, like the cheating [we just never caught it] and kidnapping Eva [it was a fear I had during the divorce]. He pushed grades, never liked any of my or my mom's friends, never supported our interests. I couldn't bring myself to make him a redeemable character when he really wasn't.

Diane Spring is Eva's mother, and shares a lot of qualities with my mom, Donna. She loves to read, specifically *Outlander*, and is a nurse. She is very much a background character, but she is the backbone in Eva's life.

Outline/Timeline:

I. Chapter One

- a. The story opens as Eva's father gives her a lecture about wanting to be an artist. The following day she happens upon Conner on the morning bus,

recognizing a pain in his eyes. Eva and Conner then become partners for their English class project and begin to bond over *Black Veil Brides*.

II. Chapter Two

- a. Eva and her friends realize a change in Conner and Conner's father makes an appearance after school. She then calls her father and ignores the suspicious voice in his apartment. Conner and Eva decide to make a movie for their project and agree to get together on the weekend, before which Koby makes another jab at Eva about careers. Instead of setting up for filming, the two have a party, until Conner gets frightened when Eva's Mom gets home.

III. Chapter Three

- a. Something's up with Conner, but Eva introduces him to Cristina, Felix, and Brooke at lunch. After school, the crew filmed at Eva's house, but Conner needed to leave right after. At the end of the week, Conner accidentally reveals that he had a sister and that his parents are divorced.

IV. Chapter Four

- a. The group gets together and Brooke and Alex's house for a celebratory sleepover after Conner finished editing the project. A comfortable career discussion proceeds as half the group begins playing *Just Dance*. In the night, Eva learns things about Conner no one ever knew.

V. Chapter Five

- a. Things start to decline for Conner and Eva becomes increasingly worried after hearing a rumor and then witnessing Conner and his father in

Walmart. She calls him later and together go online to search for his long-lost sister.

VI. Chapter Six

- a. It's presentation day in English class and everyone is shocked at Conner's transformation. After classes, Conner and Eva briefly discuss her dad's expectations, where Conner enlightens her about psychology. Eva's father is not in a great mood, the two fight, but Eva forces an apology. The next day, Eva confronts her father about his secret and hell breaks loose.

VII. Chapter Seven

- a. Their safe haven invaded, Conner and Eva end up at the hospital. Emma comes down and is reunited with Conner. Both of their lives improve for the better, with the promise of an epic sleepover on the horizon with Emma, and Eva making career decisions for herself.

This story has many variations from its original 2012 plot. The first story plot originated after I got a lecture from my dad and I just wanted to run away. I created an entire world where that was a reality, where I put my friends' characters into the story, and just wrote whatever I wanted. Eva was the star of a love triangle between Felix and Conner in that story. As I grew older, I became detached from those romance clichés and came to really despise the classic "friends to lovers" trope. I only despise it because in my friend group, I was the only one who never dated. I was just the "mom friend." Anyway, there are four existing pieces with Conner and Eva as star characters, one of which Eva does not appear in. In 2013 during high school, I wrote a short story from the perspective of a male English teacher that took notice of Conner's behavior and absences

from school. He intervened one night when Conner called for help and continued to be a support for him after his father's arrest. In 2018, I wrote a short story titled "Euphoria" about Eva and Conner in roughly the same situations as this current story, kind of bonding and planning to run away together, to find euphoria. As for this current version, also titled "Euphoria," this is the revision of the original story plot mixed with those prior stories, but with an ending the original never had.

"Euphoria" got its name from a song by the same name that I listened to on repeat while writing the short story from 2018. It's a song by Jungkook from BTS on their album *Love Yourself: Answer*. Given the content of the first short story under that title, my workshop peers found it to be unsuitable because euphoria is the exact opposite of what they should be seeking, like sanctuary. However, the song pertains to a story on its own within BTS's album stories. "Euphoria" takes place when Jungkook's character is about to jump off a roof and receives a call from Yoongi and decides not to jump. Eva and Conner's situations resemble theirs in a way, so the song fit to me, and the name just stuck ever since.

Music was an essential part of the original story, so I wanted to incorporate that in this version, through Eva and Conner's bond. Black Veil Brides is the band that attaches those two at the beginning, much like how BVB brought me closer to my best friend in high school. The group of "outcasts" referred to in the story was the group of kids that were known to be "emo" troublemakers, a crowd society taught us to avoid. My friends and I never fit in with that crowd, but we didn't quite fit in anywhere else either. We made friends easily, but we had our own small group of eight people that had each other's backs [for the most part]. My best friend and I bonded intensely over Black Veil

Brides, Sleeping with Sirens, and Pierce the Veil—their music just spoke to our wounded souls and still do. Music is a very critical part of who we are. I had the idea to use lyrics at the start and end of each chapter to capture the mood while also highlighting songs that meant a lot to me back in high school.

The creative project in the story is heavily inspired by an adaptation project I did for English my senior year of high school. Three of my friends and I made a movie adaptation for Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat.” It was one of my top favorite projects I had ever worked on. It was a perfect way to bring Conner and Eva into each other’s lives, almost like a fated interaction. *Breathing Underwater* and *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* were two stories about abuse I read in my Encounters with Lit class. Although these were minor subjects in the story, Conner’s adversity toward *Breathing Underwater* would be a slight clue of his homelife, *Staying Fat* not so much.

This story has come a long way from 2012. After I received the first draft of this version, I ended up almost entirely rewriting it. I had the mindset of a strictly platonic friendship between Conner and Eva, but my committee felt that my writing didn’t match that—and having limited insight into Eva’s thoughts also proved difficult to establish their relationship. The only option to me was to rewrite the story to incorporate more internal dialogue from Eva and make the platonic aspect of their relationship more prominent. About halfway through, I realized that some of the closeness I wrote between them I didn’t want to change. These particular scenes weren’t written with a romantic relationship in mind at all, but I came to terms that people would see their relationship how they wanted no matter how I wrote it. I can’t force people to not think beyond my words. Granted, the inclusion of Emma was used to emphasize their friendship, but the

old original plot did have Conner and Eva as love interests of each other.

Conner's family is a train wreck. The story behind his parent's divorce for this version was based on them getting married very early because Hellen got pregnant with Conner [before I added Emma into the plot]. John was a workaholic and Hellen loved to spend every penny he made and be with men that would cater to her. They were very incompatible. Conner was essentially stuck there with neither of his parents interested in him. Then Hellen found a man that gave her anything she wanted, and she left, leaving Conner with John. Eventually, extremely intoxicated, John blew up and took his anger out on Conner, who was just seven years old. They unfortunately settled into a routine between John working or being drunk; Conner just trying to obey him and be quiet when he came home drunk to avoid a beating. John would keep Conner at home if injuries were particularly bad or noticeable, calling the school explaining that he was terribly sick. Conner was trained to cover up any injuries for fear he'd get beaten worse next time. That meant he always wore his leather jacket, he'd wear makeup, he avoided unnecessary connections with others that might take notice. Teachers suspected bullying at some points when marks on his face were more difficult to hide, but no one ever moved to do anything. Just a little nudge at how some schools handle bullying or potentially more serious problems. Anyway, Emma was an idea one of my friends suggested to strengthen Conner and Eva's platonic friendship, if Eva reminded Conner of his sister, then it'd be a little weird to imagine them together. But, I ended up really loving the idea of Conner having an older sister that he was immensely close to because their parents weren't interested in either of them. I tied the creative project to Conner and his sister's fun little videos they made before Hellen left with her. Emma's existence also allowed for a better

ending on his part. Foster care has been a huge interest of mine during my last year of college because the system is so overloaded and falling apart; having Conner be a part of that mess wasn't giving him justice. I needed Emma to be in a foster home, so Hellen died of a heroin overdose and the Robinsons then adopted her. Then, technically, the Robinsons could become Conner's emergency foster placement, and eventual family.

The sleepover scene stuck around from 2012. The first draft I received a few complaints that there wasn't anything dramatic happening, so it made the sleepover unimportant enough for scene, and that it was too safe, in a way. My friends and I had sleepovers where we just watched movies and ate junk food until early in the morning. We were not rebellious kids in that manner. I changed the scene quite a bit, including a new scene with the project, discussion of plans after high school, and a better introduction to Conner's traumatic life. This scene allows the characters to all interact with each other and fully include Conner in that friend circle. It also signifies a shift of feeling in the story.

For the longest time I had no resolved end for Eva's part of the story, even with the first draft of this thesis. In the rewrite, I included hints of her father's cheating throughout, to add to his intense and overbearing presence when it came to grades and careers with Eva. Combining that knowledge and Conner's support about choosing her own lifestyle pushed Eva to confront her father about it. The confrontation and kidnapping came to me at three in the morning, saying "This might be a stretch, but its better than nothing!" And I took it.

My second draft actually had a longer summarized ending, but my committee felt it was very unneeded. I felt the need to wrap up everything because that's what

workshops in my creative writing classes often boiled down to: “I want more of this and this” or “well, what happened next?” But I removed those extra paragraphs and used one sentence to put a hopeful bow on the story. Essentially, Conner will be placed in Emma’s foster home that will eventually become his permanent home. Eva’s mother will divorce her father. And once everyone’s life settled down, the giant group of seven [Eva, Conner, Emma, Brooke, Alex, Cristina, and Felix] will have a massive sleepover and possibly make a silly video together.

Although this story is fiction, there are many nonfictional elements within Eva’s story. Her father is very much what mine was: man of the house, accusatory, controlling, always right. Mom and I were live-in servants while he got to sit around and go out with his friends whenever he wanted. Our friends always had something wrong with them or they didn’t live up to his standards. He loved to make fun of our friends, especially mine. If I ever defended them or myself, he’d take offense to my “backtalking” and I would have to apologize. The circumstances of the divorce were very different between the story and what actually happened, but it was just as scary. I was afraid to be at the house alone because I knew he was lurking in the public access across the street or driving by with his “friends.” He thought because he never hit us that we weren’t justified in wanting to be away from him. He tried to tell me, as a psychology major, that emotional abuse wasn’t a thing—that his therapist had said that. If that was the case, his therapist wasn’t as progressive as they should’ve been. The pet names used by Eva’s parents are what mine called me, and my mom still calls me. Diane’s character is very much my mother in the story, although most of the events are fictional.

The main inspiration for this story was my life, the events in my life that made me

want to run away from everything. I've grown and learned since the original plot formed, so most of that storyline wouldn't have worked out in the real world. My first thesis idea included two stories, this and another, but all of them featured types of abuse: emotional, physical, and sexual. A noticeable theme was trauma, which unfortunately affects a lot of people. I don't dive into the full effect or range of the abuse Conner or Eva goes experiences because that would make the story ever-longer. In Conner's case, the hints are everywhere, but not everyone will take notice or attribute them to the correct cause. I feel that *The Storyteller* by Antonia Michaelis, my all-time favorite book, taught me the impact of foreshadowing or the use of small hints. There are two storylines in her novel that parallel each other, but the hints are in both, and they're very small. When the dots are connected, the feeling is devastating—because you start to develop an idea of what might be happening, but it escalates farther than you want it to. Although I didn't have this story vividly in my mind while writing, I believe it has influenced my writing style for the better.

Rick Riordan is an author who never fails to intrigue me with his mythological stories. He also has a knack for writing many characters without it getting confusing. My story includes many characters, but I did get feedback that it would be better with maybe just one or two of Eva's friends. While that may be true, it would never truly be the story I wanted to tell without those characters.