

The Narrative Matters:
Depictions of Mental Health and Suicide in Fiction

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For Dad – you never ceased to believe in my ability to reach for the stars.

Thank you for that. I hope this reaches you there. This one is for you.

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Artist Statement

Introduction to the Manuscript

The Fadeaway is a realistic fiction novel stemming from my observations and research of those who have experienced anxiety and depression. The main character, Jayden Walker, is loosely based on someone close to me who has experienced bouts of depression during certain times of his life. My friend has always had a zest for life and is truly a bright light in the midst of a dark world. Still, the darkness has sometimes reached him. No one is immune to it, and for some, it grabs hold of them, plunging them into loneliness, as it did for my friend. The story of Jayden is meant to follow him on his journey where he falls from excellence due to anxiety and depression. He succumbs to the darkness which almost costs him his life.

While my close friend was the original source of inspiration, I have also taught for several years and have seen some of my own students experience anxiety and depression as they are preparing to move on to the next phase of life after high school. The story begins with Jayden saying goodbye to his childhood hometown and venturing off into his first year at the University of California in Los Angeles. He experiences several trials he has never encountered before, and without the support system around him that he is used to, he starts spiraling into the darkness. He tries to shut everyone out, so they do not see him at his worst. Jayden realizes he needs to learn to rely on the strength of God and the love of those around him if he is ever going to stand a fighting chance against his battle with depression.

While the reason behind this manuscript came from real observations of those around me, it is a complete work of fiction. My prayer for this manuscript is to create a depiction of anxiety and depression that is truthful, relatable, and centered in Christ to fit in with the stories in this genre that have come before it.

Process for the Work

The process for my work began about fifteen years ago, although I did not know it at the time. My friend's personality, a bright magnet which could draw anyone in and bring joy, became a little dimmer once we were out of high school. I do not know why this happened or what may have triggered it, but I saw one of my best friends change right before my eyes. He was zealous, striving, thriving, working, achieving one day, and the next day he would not leave his bed. He let everything he had going for him fall by the wayside. He stopped going to work without a call or reason. He stopped going to school. He stopped answering calls and texts. He would just stay in his room and sleep his days away. It happened in bursts, and he would go through periods of time like this, and I never understood why.

The mind is a tricky thing. When someone feels lost or lonely and their depression becomes crippling, the darkness works its way in, magnifying the feelings of failure and worthlessness; depression is intent on telling lies. In fact, in an article by Steven D. Hollon from Vanderbilt University titled "Depression," Hollon talks about the research of Aaron Temkin Beck who "changed the world" (507). Beck's research from over 50 years ago is still one of the most used depression treatises to this day. After Beck conducted research with his patients and heard their thoughts about themselves, "Beck... became convinced that... the problem in depression was... a set of negative beliefs about the self that soured one's mood and sapped one's motivation" (Hollon 508). I saw this exact behavior in my friend. As things around him stopped working out or failure came his way, the motivation to keep going was taken from him. It was when he became lost to himself, to us, to the world, that I yearned for answers and reasoning. It broke my heart to see my best friend fall into this pit of despair, and I hated not being able to help pull him out of it. I knew my friend was still there, but he was trapped

underneath lies and darkness. All I wanted to do was help him get out of it, yet I had no idea how to do that.

The idea of seeing a sudden change in someone such as this was only solidified when I became a high school teacher. Instructing high school-aged kids is one of my greatest joys, despite the hardships that come with being a teacher. I love my students; they are the reason I teach. Nevertheless, as I taught them, got to know them, and built relationships with them, I saw the same darkness trying to peek through.

In society today, young adults have too much pressure placed on them. When I was teaching in a Title 1 public school, a school made up of a low-income student population, a lot of my students were contributors to their household. They had to sustain a job in order to help pay for some bills, so right after school, they would work until late at night. They had no time to devote to schoolwork. While many of them were more than capable, they could never tap into their potential due to their life outside of school. In an article titled, "Family Poverty Over the Early Life Course..." author Jake Najman states, "Children born into a family that experiences recurrent poverty are more likely to experience anxiety and depression when they reach adolescence and young adulthood" (et. al. 1722). My students not only grew up in this low-income lifestyle, but they also had to deal with the stress of providing for their household as well. To add to this, some of my students went home and took care of their younger siblings. They made sure their siblings did their homework, were fed dinner, took a bath, and so forth, which demanded much of their time as well. These additional responsibilities only added to their stress level, and a young teen should not have to deal with such stress. Because of these situations, I saw too many students with the brightest smiles and the most infectious personalities lose their light to the darkness.

After teaching for six years in public school and taking a year off, I became a secondary teacher at a small private Christian school which is my current job. I see these students face a vastly different kind of pressure. While most families at this school were economically stable, the rigorous classes, the constant need for perfection, and success in all aspects became crippling to some. In another article about depression in young people, it was mentioned that “[p]oor interpersonal skills, coupled with negative thought processes, can create difficulty for adolescents negotiating changing relationships with peers and families, searching for autonomy while trying to fit in, and simultaneously trying to succeed in a competitive academic and social environment” (Burns 93). My students now may not have to worry about maintaining a job to contribute to their household or taking care of a little sibling at home, but there is a lot of pressure to just maintain themselves at school with their friends while also trying to discover themselves. Some are seized with self-doubt and feel as though nothing they do is ever good enough, so they start to stress about their level of success in school. With the fear of failure at the cusp of every assignment turned in, students find their school life overwhelming, and they sometimes do not know where to turn. With college just a couple of years or a couple of months away, there is also the pressure of maintaining good academic standing and competitive test scores while participating in extracurricular activities such as sports, fine arts, clubs, or honor societies. Most of these activities require time and dedication outside of school for practices and meetings and service projects, and *it is overwhelming*.

These students go through many upsides and downsides in life. Many of my students have lost a parent or grandparent, have parents going through a divorce, or are dealing with sickness and disease in themselves or in family members. They never have the time to just be a kid because of all of the other things they have to deal with. Jayden’s story stems from this: the

idea of someone who is a light in everyone's life and has so much life and purpose to look forward to but is losing to the darkness of anxiety and depression due to the overwhelming demands placed on himself. Through the inspiration from my observations and research, I have created Jayden's story, but Jayden's struggles have become all his own. As he begins to lose his way to the darkest depths, I will seek to share clarity about anxiety and depression and what those disorders can lead to.

Vision for the Work

I want this work to shine a light on the silent killers of anxiety and depression. They may take away the life of someone by causing that person to become a shell of who they used to be. They can even take the more tragic route of causing someone to go through with taking their own life. Suicide is truly heartbreaking because every single life is precious and has purpose, and a lot of the times, especially in young adults, the choice to take their own life stems from escaping the current pain or sadness they are experiencing because they do not see a way out. They want to escape the darkness which keeps pulling them under, but suicide only gives the darkness what it wants. I want Jayden's story to help those with anxiety and depression feel comfortable in their struggle without glorifying or romanticizing mental health issues. There is much shame and guilt tied into these disorders, and I want people to know it is okay if they are going through this because they are not alone, and they are loved. I pray this work can encourage people to not be ashamed, to seek help, and most importantly, to stay here with us.

The truth is sometimes people do not even know another person is struggling with this. In *The Fadeaway*, Jayden does his best to hide all his problems. He wants to always be seen as the person who has it all together. He has these unrealistic expectations that he cannot fail, and if he does fail, he will let everyone down. He has supportive parents who would do anything for him,

but he cannot see past the fear of disappointing them if he turns out to be less than perfect, so he pushes everyone away. He does not want anyone to see him at his lowest. Jayden is the guy everyone turns to for help, the one who never fails. He refuses to allow himself to be human and make mistakes without beating himself up until he gets to the point where he gives up. His depression and anxiety come on quickly; he does not know how to escape it, and he does not want to ask for help. He wants to try to pretend everything is okay by not letting anyone in.

I hope to show this is not the right approach. I hope to show it is okay to ask for help. While these barriers are being torn down, there is still a stigma when it comes to mental health, especially for young men. In an article about depression in young college students, it was found that "...personal stigma related to mental health care is higher in male... students, which has been found to negatively impact help-seeking behavior" (Casey et. al 468). Too many young men want to pretend their mental health disorders do not exist. In my experience with talking to young men and knowing some who have struggle with this, I know they sometimes make it out to seem as though struggling with any mental health issues means there is something wrong with them, so people fear sharing their struggles. Because Jayden wants to push his struggles under the rug as if they are not real, he almost takes his life. For a long time, I never wanted to go there. The idea of suicide is gut-wrenching, and I did not want to have to put myself in a place where suicide was a possibility because it breaks my heart. However, I felt in my soul this is where Jayden needed to go. Jayden's refusal to get help, keep receiving help, let people in, and his determination to do it all on his own leads him down a dark path of destruction.

Through Jayden's spiral, I want people to see the despair he is in, but most importantly, I want people to see a ray of hope. Jayden is only a fictional character, but I believe all he goes through is something anyone can envision in their own lives. I hope that through his ending,

people can see that it gets better, there is light at the end of the tunnel, and there is hope for all that lies ahead when someone makes their way out of the darkness.

Literary Context for the Work

Both anxiety and depression have been depicted in fiction and mainstream media several times. Some of these depictions are over the top, inaccurate, and even reaching for readership or viewers. The topic of mental health is not focused on as heavily throughout the breadth of realistic fiction or in other genres, yet, with the numbers for those with mental health disorders increasing each day, there is always room to show the importance of discussing this topic. *The Fadeaway* is meant to be a story many can relate to and draw hope from.

The purpose of this manuscript is to be a tool to spread awareness of the realness of depression and anxiety and the dark depth and thoughts it could lead to, such as suicide. That being said, there are two novels which take different approaches to these topics. I found these to be the main points of focus and inspiration for me. *All the Bright Places* and *Shades of Light* have both shaped the way in which *The Fadeaway* is presented. The way these novels depict each disorder, explore the tragedy of suicide, and characterize those experiencing this mental illness helped create a starting point for how Jayden will navigate his own struggle with anxiety and depression. Through the examination of these novels, with *All the Bright Places* written from a secular point of view of mental health and *Shades of Light* written from Christian point of view, I hope *The Fadeaway* will find a comfortable place among books of the same genre.

In the novel *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven, readers are shown the struggle with depression and the dark road it can lead down. Violet Markey is suffering with the loss of her sister and is contemplating suicide when she meets Theodore Finch, a bright character who also struggles with suicidal ideation but wants to live and has the most lively take on the world.

Unfortunately, he goes into depressive episodes when he is hard to get ahold of, hard to contact; he is lost to the world, and he soon loses the battle with his mental illness. In *The Fadeaway*, Jayden will similarly be a lively person who loses his light through his struggle with depression. As Niven wrote her characters, her take on their struggle is depicted beautifully and masterfully. She is able to show, through two young people who are trying to figure out life together after trauma and hurt, there is a yearning for life and to live amidst the depression they are both going through. They lean on each other, and they are both looking for a way out. In *The Fadeaway*, Jayden does not turn to anyone for support; however, Jayden will see the benefit in community, especially as he is in his lowest moment about to take his life. Through Niven's story, I am drawing on the importance of leaning on others. While Jayden does not do this at the start, I will show it is through the support of others that he is able to make it through just as Violet finds a way to make it through with Finch's help. While Finch, unfortunately, does not survive, his ending is ambiguous and is written with such grace that the reader is left heartbroken. Niven's book helps to display Finch's suicide in a way that does not glorify it or show it as the way out or an escape. It is, instead, depicted as the tragedy it truly is after a battle against mental illness which won out in the end. I hope to manage Jayden's struggle with as much grace as Niven did.

In *Shades of Light* by Sharon Garlough Brown, readers are introduced to Wren, a wonderful young woman who is trying everything she can not to let the darkness consume her. The story follows Wren as she checks herself into a psychiatric hospital, loses her cat and best friend, gives up her job and apartment, and has to find a new path through her mental illness with the support of loved ones around her. She feels a lot of shame from experiencing and being diagnosed with anxiety and depression. She has a history of being put down by others whenever she mentioned her worries. Because of this, Wren has trouble with unbelief and feeling

unworthy. Brown makes it clear there are people who judge those struggling with their mental health, and it has sometimes kept people away and brought them further down. However, she shows people accepting Wren and comforting her in any way they can as she struggles, bringing in the truth of Christ's love: He walks alongside us in our suffering. In *The Fadeaway*, Jayden will experience similar kinds of loss and unbelief. Jayden, in fact, resents God and wants nothing to do with him. Like Wren, Jayden will eventually find refuge in Christ. From Brown, I hope to depict, as she did, the depth of despair that anxiety and depression can take someone to, as well as the hope that can come from Christ to get us out of it.

Significance of the Topic as a Christian Scholar

The following verse from 1 John 1:5 was written on my bedroom wall growing up as a young teenager: "*God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all*" (NLT). This verse has always stood out to me because I found hope in the image of complete darkness being dispelled by God's light, so I carefully painted these words on my wall, so I could look at them, read them daily, and find encouragement through them. God is our light, our hope, our anchor at all times.

With all the confusion and changes and lifestyles people are throwing themselves into, it is nothing but an endless search to fill a void that will forever remain open without the love of Christ. The world is searching. Young people are searching. They have many people influencing them from all areas of their lives: movies, television, social media, music, school, home. The differing views and expectations are overwhelming. In the end, they want to find a place where they belong and are accepted, which is in the arms of Christ. No matter where someone is in life, they are searching for the meaning of life. I want to show even more how God is what everyone should be pursuing. I do not want to create the idea that God makes all problems go away because that is not the case. I want people to understand, instead, that God will walk with them

and guide them through their problems - if and when their faith is placed in Him, He will have beautiful plans for their lives despite hardships they face.

Jayden is running from the light. He knows the truth, and he is still running. Jayden's life begins to spiral out of control even more when he puts his belief in God on the backburner, but the fact is he cannot do it by himself. The only thing that saves him from himself and his attempt to take his own life is God - an urging from the Holy Spirit for all Jayden still has in store in this life if he were to turn back to Christ and trust him once more. It is not until he opens up his heart to Christ again that he begins to see a way out of all the anger, hurt, pain, and darkness he has placed himself in. The darkness does not magically go away, but Jayden now has a source of light which expels the darkness. My hope is for Jayden to inspire others to Christ.

For as long as I can remember, I thought I would write young adult romance novels. When I started this master's program, Jayden's story was going to be upbeat, about his life after the hardship, and it was, of course, going to include a budding romance. It was not until I wrote a prologue which quickly detailed the events of his hardship that I was told this prologue could be a novel all on its own. When I finally put pen to paper, this version of Jayden's story became a reality. It shocked me because I never envisioned writing a story like *The Fadeaway*, but I believe this is the story God always meant for me to write. My prayer for this is to be an inspirational story in the New Adult genre spoken from a male perspective because I feel as though the world needs to see that battling mental health affects everyone, and it is okay to seek help, no matter your gender. I hope the stigma can eventually be removed, and this is a step in that direction. I believe someone needs to read his story, experience Jayden's pain, be touched by his hardships, relate to his crippling thoughts, and come out on the other end with him and with hope for the future through a relationship with Christ. I only pray I can do his story justice.

Ingraining Hope in Depictions of Mental Health and Suicide

One of the opening verses in the book of John says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (NLT). This verse from John 1:5 offers a hope that is imperceivable in society today. The state of the world is steeped in darkness, making it harder to see the light. Every time the news is turned on, a newspaper is opened, or an internet browser is accessed, tragedy is at the forefront. Among those tragedies is the indistinguishable struggle with mental health, the stigma which makes people ashamed to seek help, and ultimately those who decide to end their life because they cannot see a way out of the darkness that surrounds them. While the struggle with mental health is hard and real, the number of people turning to suicide because they are struggling to find the light is nothing short of catastrophic.

The truth of the matter is depression and suicide are not beautiful; sometimes, however, they have been portrayed this way in fiction, and that is the real tragedy. These topics are not something which should be taken lightly in any kind of creative work. Since poor mental health and suicide are prevalent among countless people today, conversations about these topics *must* be had, and novels can be an intimate way to open the difficult discussion about these matters. When tackling topics such as suicide and mental healthcare, authors must tread lightly, even though they have to tell hard truths, because authors have a responsibility to their readers to be as accurate as they can about these topics. When writing creatively about mental illness and suicide or suicidal ideation, the job of the writer is not to merely create a captivating story which can ensue a media-induced, suicide imitation reaction known as the Werther effect, but it is, instead, the ethical responsibility of the author to address the seriousness of mental health by establishing believability in the depictions of depressive disorders and suicide in order to destigmatize gross misconceptions surrounding mental health which can promote a positive imitation reaction

known as the Papageno effect and help normalize the need to seek treatment for those individuals struggling with their mental health.

Sick-Lit and the Werther and Papageno Effects

When reading fiction, many people are provided with an escape from their own lives as they are thrown into a character's life. This escape can be lifesaving when managed properly. Some books have been coined as "Sick-Lit," which is a genre geared toward young adult readers and gaining popularity among them. Sick-Lit is exactly what it sounds like: literature which is "rooted in illness, self-harm, suicide, sufferance, violence, and death" (Testoni et. al. 154). Many of these novels have focused on physical diseases, with popular novels like *Five Feet Apart* which centers on cystic fibrosis or *The Fault in Our Stars* which discusses cancer patients. There are also many novels focusing on mental health disorders which have gained immense popularity such as *The Perks of Being a Wildflower*, *Turtles All the Way Down*, and *Girl in Pieces*. With the numbers rising of those who require mental health treatments or of those suffering with one or more mental health disorders, this version of Sick-Lit has become widespread.

When writing fiction, there are many responsibilities of an author when they choose to create a story. In the article "Suicide Prevention for Youth," it is mentioned "[w]hen addressing sensitive issues such as mental health, risky lifestyles, and suicide, it is important... to be cautious and sensitive... to personal histories" (Wasserman et. al. 8). This article discusses the importance of mental health awareness and how to best serve young people. The inescapable truth is an author never knows who might be reading their story, what each reader has experienced, and what they may be going through at the time. Taking on the task of addressing these issues cannot be done lightheartedly because youth are extremely impressionable. To treat these topics with a carefree attitude would be a dangerous disservice to the audience the author

has an opportunity to reach. In another article, the author, Kristine Pytash, talks about how young adult literature can be used to help young people. She states, "...reading young adult literature focused on bullying and suicide also provides adolescents with opportunities to gain insight into human nature, explore emotions that might seem puzzling or troubling, and reflect on the consequences, without engaging in these acts" (Pytash 477). This thought helps explain young adult literature as a vessel for young people to understand the difficulties they may face in life by viewing it through the life of a character. When done right, represented accurately, and shown to be a normal part of life, poor mental health and suicidal ideation do not have to be seen as shameful.

Mental healthcare does not need to be disgraced because it affects many people, and accurately illustrating these emotions and scenarios in literature is important because of its ability to reach people who may need it. In an article titled, "Where's My Happy Ending?" authors Kathleen Deakin and Gloria Eastman write, "Literary fiction asks the reader to consider the behaviors and motivations of complex characters who are struggling with a variety of human challenges" (23). This quote shares how a reader becomes invested in the lives of characters which causes them to reflect on all they are going through and experiencing. Readers, in turn, seek to understand their emotions and the decisions made by these characters. If these characters struggle with mental health or suicidal ideation, their emotions, motivations, and actions become a much graver issue when geared toward a young reader. When authors can use their platform to spread awareness and bring light to these issues in order to help someone struggling to see they are not alone, there are avenues for help, and there are many people who are willing to help them, real change can occur.

Since many young people have become attracted to the variation of Sick-Lit that shines a light on mental disorders, it has had both positive and negative effects on its readers. The two effects spread by mental health Sick-Lit are the Werther effect and the Papageno effect. The Werther effect is the idea of literature, media, news, and other outlets focusing on suicide with an emphasis on the negative aspects, the lack of hope, and result in the completion of suicide creates a “copycat” effect which increases suicide rates. This effect was named after the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was published in the 1700’s. This novel resulted in copycat suicides because people connected with Werther and the heartbreak he went through to the point where they even took their life in the same way (Moody). In an article focused on the narratives surrounding reports on suicide and suicidal ideation, the authors discuss how these copycat suicides stem from reports “emphasizing suicidal acts, death, and hopelessness” as well as “the inclusion of suicide methods and statements that suicide was inevitable” (Hawley et. al. 759). This quote explains if the narrative of these stories is hopeless, people reading stories like this begin to believe there is no other way out. Because of these kinds of reports and stories, the Werther effect remains prevalent and results in increased suicide rates.

The Papageno effect, however, is the opposite of the Werther effect. This effect shows how the focus of the suicide discussing someone who was not successful or tried to seek help can create a positive outcome. A character in Mozart’s opera “The Magic Flute” was the inspiration for this term. In this story, a young man also went through heartbreak, but he was encouraged by three of his friends to look on the bright side and focus on all the things worth living for. The Papageno effect shows hope in despair despite the isolation these mental illnesses have created. In another article about Sick-Lit in particular, the authors discuss how this hope was created because of “the sharing of narratives by individuals who have refrained from adopting suicidal

plans and instead adopted positive coping mechanisms in adverse circumstances” (Testoni et. al. 162-163). This evidence shows when the narrative becomes one of positivity, the number of suicides that follow decreases because struggling individuals have seen hope. Whether it is in the newspaper, in novels, or in a script for television or movies, how the story is told matters. In the article previously mentioned about reporting on suicide stated, “professionals should be encouraged to present narratives of hope and survival, telling stories of people who... engage in adaptive coping mechanisms in order to overcome challenging situations” (Hawley et. al. 763). This idea directly demands that professionals in charge of delivering stories about mental health, suicide, and suicidal ideation do a better job of creating a narrative that will still give people hope despite the harsh reality of the topic. No matter what outlet is discussing these topics, the focus should be on creating a positive narrative capable of producing a positive impact.

Dangers of the Werther Effect in Fiction

One of the most popular Sick-Lit novels that has reached many young audiences is *13 Reasons Why* by Jay Asher. The novel, which has been turned into a popular television series, follows the story of a young girl, Hannah Baker, who commits suicide in her junior year of high school. Before she does this, she makes thirteen cassette tapes which she deems as her thirteen reasons why she has committed suicide, placing blame on peers and a faculty member for the choice she made. The story is told as Clay Jenson, one of the main characters, listens to the tapes over the course of one long night. While Asher may have had good intentions behind this story, there are severe issues with the portrayals in this novel and the Netflix adaptation.

The first, and largest issue, is Hannah’s suicide being glorified. The entire narrative is centered around her death, making it seem that if people had been different, maybe she would still be here. After leaving all these tapes, the depictions of those who receive the tapes seem as if

they are agonizing over her death. In an article titled “‘13 Reasons Why’: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly” by Deborah Serani, she talks about how the story makes it seem as though “...a suicide will reform a sinner, soften a bully, or change the character of another [and that] is seriously misguided. It's also reckless to suggest that suicide can offer vindication for the wrongs a person has endured.” Serani points out it is erroneous to make it seem as though Hannah’s suicide is the reason people decided to change their ways because most of the time this is not the case. Hannah calls people out *after* she has died and makes people see the error of their ways *because* she takes her own life. It is as if it is only because of her death that the truth is brought to light. This idea is incorrect, and the book should not have made it seem this way because it creates the impression that only through death can any sort of change be made.

The problem with this portrayal of her suicide is that Hannah seems to blame and be angry with those who are on the tapes, thus making her suicide into an act of revenge against the people who hurt her which can be dangerous to the audience. In the article “Reasons Why Not: A Critical Review of the Television Series 13 Reasons Why,” author Emily Cruikshank states, “...suicidal contagion is fostered by elements such as simplistic explanations for suicide, presenting suicide as a method of getting revenge, glorifying the victim, and presenting a methodology option” (808). This quote explains how displaying Hannah’s suicide as a means of getting back at those who hurt her can cause others to react in the same way. By sharing how her classmates’ stories affected her on tape and threatening them if they did not do as she asked, Hannah’s suicide is glorified as revenge. Alison Knopf discusses in her article “Call to action to entertainment industry over *13 Reasons Why*” how Netflix adapted the book by having “the series [open] with her locker being adorned with flowers, cards, etc... which only adds to the memorializing of her suicide” (3). By pointing this out, Knopf displays that Hannah was

somehow famous and glorified by her act of suicide. Because all of this happens *after* her death, seemingly, people only felt sorry or changed *because* of her death, as if someone can teach people a lesson after they take their own life. Knopf discusses how both the adapted series and the book's "most obvious and predictable and completely wrong message... [is] that people can leave a history after they commit suicide" (1). This message Knopf mentions has reached countless young people. Hannah's suicide is romanticized and made to be this beautiful lesson of what can happen when one takes their own life, as if people know it was their fault this suicide happened, maybe they will change. Unfortunately, this idea is spreading a false narrative.

The truth is, after all Hannah witnessed and experienced, it was clear she was struggling with a mental disorder - most likely depression. However, Asher never mentions this term in his novel. In an article talking about the representations of mental health in young adult fiction, author Alison Monaghan states, "...the act of naming a disease or condition works to eliminate the stigma surrounding it" (Monaghan 41). Yet, in his novel, Asher never claims Hannah was depressed, but Hannah's character needed to be diagnosed or have the word spoken about her. She needed to talk about her feelings of depression because the reader needed to have a name for all the "signs" she was exhibiting as a depressed individual. Sadly, the word depression does not come up even once as a way to describe what Hannah is going through. In the article "Evaluating Factors and Interventions That Influence Help-seeking and Mental Health Service Utilization Among Suicidal Individuals," the authors share, "[a]cross age groups, less than half of individuals at elevated suicide risk interface with some form of mental health services" (Hom 30). This quote brings the understanding that most young people do not seek help. Hannah also does not get any help in addition to her feelings never being diagnosed or labeled as depression, which can further deter young people from seeking help. There are too many people who do not

receive mental health treatment, and adolescents, even more so, are reluctant to get help when dealing with mental health struggles. Wasserman et. al state, “[y]oung people may not ask for help because they see it as a failure in the process of becoming self-sufficient... Oftentimes young people are reluctant to look for professional help because of the stigma of mental illness and, for similar reasons, they may also be afraid to address the issues of mental health to their peers” (2). This evidence shows why young people are fearful of receiving a diagnosis or help. Because of this fact among many young people, it is critical to present a version of someone seeking help, so others can see these behaviors normalized and feel less isolation in their mental health struggles.

13 Reasons Why had the opportunity to demonstrate Hannah trying to get help when she started exhibiting signs of depression. With a platform to show the value of receiving a diagnosis and help, the opportunity was devastatingly missed in both the novel and the show. With the show having a total of 476 million view hours in the first month, it is even more disappointing that this show wasn't educating its viewers better or offering more hope (Avestruz). This platform could have been an opening to discuss how to reach out for help, get on medication, and work through the issues, but instead the Werther effect was put into place, and the narrative began to show the only way out was death. In the article about influencing others to seek help and mental health services, Melanie Hom explains how making death the only way is extremely dangerous because “...individuals with... suicidal ideation refuse or reject available treatment or support... this is in part due to the hopelessness, pessimism, and maladaptive coping often characteristic of suicidal individuals” (31). This quote illustrates suicidal individuals as already feeling hopeless, so they do not see the point in searching for help. Since this is true about many people with suicidal ideation, there was an opportunity for a call to action in *13 Reasons Why*.

Yet, seeing Hannah not seek help only made it seem justified to not reach out for support, and the opportunity fell flat in influencing others to do the opposite of what Hannah did.

Had Hannah actually been diagnosed in the book, it could have revealed her act of suicide as unnatural for a person with depression. People with depression are no longer truly able to function when they're in the depths of it. In fact, as Serani notes, "[m]ost depressed individuals experience a profound depletion in executive functioning and have poor impulse control. It'd be highly unlikely for a suicidal person to have the stamina, insight, and presence of mind to create such an elaborate scheme like Hannah did." This idea explains that Hannah's suicidal methodology was impossible to go through with as she is made to do. While Hannah's suicide was most likely caused by her struggle with an undiagnosed mental illness, the book's unrealistic representation of depression and suicide is only harmful to its readers who are made to believe their act of suicide can be so meticulously planned out that they will be able to leave a legacy when they die.

Furthermore, when this novel was adapted for the Netflix series, her suicide in the series was presented gruesomely and differently than what happened in the novel. The book discussed Hannah taking pills to end her life - although not before discussing several other ways in which she could end her life. The Netflix series displayed Hannah slitting her wrists and laying in a bathtub as the viewers were made to watch the life drain out of her. In the article "Reasons Why Not," it has been shown "...increased exposure to the modelling of suicides can increase suicide risk for adolescents, and exposure to intense content such as suicide has also been shown to increase distress in adolescent individuals" (Cruikshank 806). This quote introduces how distasteful depictions of suicide can either increase the risk for suicide or cause anxiety among those who view it. Therefore, nothing good could come from a suicide scene with such graphic

images. It was unnecessary, and the Werther effect was put into play for “copycat” behaviors because the method of suicide was extremely detailed. Unfortunately, both the novel and the book are guilty of this. Since the portrayal of her death was deeply appalling, Netflix had to remove the scene of her suicide from the series because there was such backlash from advocates for suicide prevention. Many adolescents may not understand the seriousness of what they are being exposed to, so when it is managed with excessive carelessness, the wrong message is easily sent. More thought should have been put into what was shown to its young audience. Because the details of the novel were terribly mishandled, the series seemed to turn into a money-seeking enterprise. It was actually noted in “Reasons Why Not” that “... one of the executive producers of the show admits that ‘our job is mostly to entertain’” (Cruikshank 810). This idea was solidified when the Netflix show went on for four seasons instead of ending after the first. The storylines became more tragic and twisted, and it was obvious that the hope was to capitalize on the success of the show by portraying such grotesque storylines for the characters simply for entertainment and not education (Avestruz). When this kind of attitude is taken for such serious issues, it is clear any attempt to spread awareness is most certainly misguided.

Lastly, when Hannah does set out to get help, the one person she chooses to go to is a trusted adult: her teacher and guidance counselor. Even so, Asher chooses to portray this person as an incompetent source of help. Because this person failed her, she goes on to commit suicide later that day. Adults should be a source of safety and comfort for young people struggling with mental disorders. In the article “Why We Should Worry About ‘13 Reasons Why,’” Sheila Quinn says, “It is important that all teenagers know they can get help from responsible and caring adults in their life — a message that is not included...” in the book or series (664). This idea shows how perilous it is to represent the one adult Hannah goes to as someone who lets her

down and tells her to move on from her problems. In a work of fiction, the author creates the narrative, and this story could have easily been changed to present adults in a positive light. Hom shares in her article about interventions for seeking mental healthcare, for many adolescents, “...one commonly reported problem is difficulty approaching adults for help or not being able to identify a trustworthy adult” (32). Both the novel and the series solidified this thought of adults being untrustworthy. Using this narrative with a school guidance counselor treating Hannah in this way may have inadvertently discouraged young people from seeking help. In a *Washington Post* interview, Kathy Cowan, who is a spokesperson for the National Association of School Psychologists, said, “It sends the message that school mental professionals are not to be a trusted source for help” (Balingit). It is unacceptable to display the guidance counselor as incompetent and uncaring for his students. In her call to action over this story, Alison Knopf writes, “Hannah’s efforts to seek help for her distress and suicidal ideation are presented as futile, even counter-productive, and lead to the hopelessness that precede[s] the unnecessary graphic portrayal of her suicide” (Knopf 3). Because this was a fictional story, the narrative given to Hannah could have been changed. When an author controls the narrative, they can choose to show hope. The reason *13 Reasons Why* contributes to the Werther effect is because the writers chose to show hopelessness in the book and the Netflix adaptation.

When Jay Asher wrote *13 Reasons Why*, he chose this topic because he had a personal connection with it. When answering questions about his book, Asher revealed he had “a close relative... [who] attempted suicide. Thankfully (and luckily) she survived” (“Between the Lines”). He talked about how her story had many moving pieces which ultimately brought her to her lowest point which is portrayed in Hannah’s story. Asher says he wanted people to understand how they might impact those around them, just as Hannah is impacted. He wanted to

force uncomfortable conversations with someone who might be suicidal, saying he would “rather err on the side of offending them than losing them to suicide” (“Between the Lines”). However, even Asher did not want to focus too heavily on the real issues. Asher said when he began writing this book, he “focused on writing this as a suspense novel... it makes the reader keep turning the pages. And... I wanted readers to focus on the characters caught in the middle, rather than the issues themselves” (“Between the Lines”). This way of thinking is illogical and reckless. The characters are important, but they would not be anywhere without their issues. Hannah’s story would not be the same without her depression and eventual suicide, so to focus on these issues in the novel well and accurately, is a responsibility Asher took on and failed at.

Asher knew he was writing about a hard issue, and what he was writing mattered. When asked what someone should do if they see themselves in Hannah, he even said, “[t]hey absolutely must talk to someone about their feelings. Unfortunately, because of the stigma... many people are embarrassed to admit when they’re depressed. The important thing to know is, even when it feels like you don’t have anyone to talk to, you do” (“Between the Lines”). Then he goes on to list the national suicide hotline and website. Asher’s thoughts for the novel seemingly came from a hope to spread awareness, yet he did not have his character take any of his suggestions. He never mentioned Hannah was suffering from depression, even though he knew there was shame surrounding admitting to this, and he clearly intended her to be struggling with depression. He suggests people always have someone to talk to and they should always look for help, but Hannah does not get the chance to do that. In fact, he made the one person she reached out to fail her. He never diagnosed her, gave her the opportunity to take medication, or go to therapy and talk to a helpful adult. He made Hannah hopeless. Asher’s idea may have come from a good place, but he failed in sharing the key details.

Hannah Baker's story is tragic, what she experiences as a young adult is unfathomable, and she takes her own life because of it. Nevertheless, the representation of the entire situation displays nothing but hopelessness with the only way out as death, which can hurt the audience subject to this novel. "Reasons Why Not" tells us "...adolescents are at a higher risk of copycat behavior because, on average, they are highly susceptible to social learning; therefore, they may strongly be impacted by characters in media with whom they identify" (Cruikshank 806). If any young person was feeling connected to the way Hannah was treated by her classmates, teachers, and parents, they may have thought their only option was death because this was the only option Hannah was given in her story. She was not exposed to the other options that were out there. Readers did not see any hope for her because she was written not to have any hope. In her call to action, Knopf says, "Messages of hope, resiliency, recovery, and bereavement following a depicted suicide are all areas that the entertainment industry must begin to address..." (3). It should have been addressed. *The job of a writer is not merely to entertain.* If an author wants to approach these topics, there is an ethical responsibility to approach them in the right way. Hannah's story was told in a way that demonstrated seeking help and going to adults was pointless. Her story made it seem as though suicide was the only way out from her troubles. Her story was awfully skewed and created messages which could negatively impact all the people who were exposed to it.

Benefits of the Papageno Effect in Fiction

The novel *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven is another popular Sick-Lit novel that has the opposite effect of *13 Reasons Why*, and this story has *two* young people who are struggling with depression and suicidal ideation. Theodore Finch and Violet Markey actually meet in the first chapter at the top of the bell tower at their high school, both contemplating

suicides. Finch shares his thoughts in depth which includes his ideas of what he may look like in death if he did decide to jump. While this does discuss the method of suicide, what Finch does is not merely contemplate ways to die, but instead, he talks about the ugliness of it. He talks about the effect it would have on others if he went through with it. He looks at the possibility as a negative one which makes him rethink his decision. Additionally, when he realizes Violet is there thinking about jumping, he sees her fear. Niven is able to portray Violet's suicidal ideation as fearful - not vengeful or taken lightly. Because of this fear, Finch decides to try to comfort her and then saves her. He literally talks her off the ledge. When she is finally safe, he continues contemplating his suicide until Violet uses the exact same words he just used for her to talk him off his own ledge, and they save each other. The opening of the book asks if "today is a good day to die" (Niven 3). Niven shows a few moments later that today was a good day to keep on living.

The Papageno effect is represented here because there is immediate hope for these characters from the start. It comes in the form of an unlikely meeting, an unexpected connection, but there is hope because of this new friendship. In an article titled "Role of Media Reports in Completed and Prevented Suicide: Werther V. Papageno Effects," author Thomas Niederkrotenthaler says when people read stories "...with a focus on suicidal ideation not accompanied by a suicide attempt or a completed suicide, [they] may have a protective impact..." (et. al. 241). Readers see both Violet and Finch contemplating the end of their lives, but they do not go through with it. This image revealed they were not alone in their thoughts or feelings. It is also proven by Niederkrotenthaler that "... the actual reporting of suicidal ideation itself may contribute to preventing suicide" (et. al. 241). Exhibiting Violet and Finch with these contemplations of suicide can be helpful to readers. When young people can identify with a character or see a character going through similar struggles, they hold onto that. If they are then

shown these characters finding a way out from such crippling feelings, they may feel as if they have a way out too.

After Finch and Violet save each other, Niven has them start spending more time together. Despite how they met, they have found a way to enjoy life together. Readers learn more about each character's struggles, but through those struggles, each character finds a reason to keep going. In "Evaluating Representations of Mental Health in Young Adult Fiction" Alison Monaghan states, "[f]or a teen experiencing depression, a novel about another teen going through a similar situation may be all that that reader needs to feel less alone or to convince him to confide in a friend or parent" (Monaghan 34). Niven's story helps readers feel this way. Violet and Finch found each other at an unlikely moment, but it turned out to be what they needed to make it through. This sends a message of hope, and all stories like this need is a ray of hope.

The reader eventually learns Violet is struggling with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder from being in a car accident with her sister who lost her life. Violet ends up being able to share her thoughts with Finch, and he is nothing but encouraging to her. Readers learn Finch marks his time as being awake and being asleep. He acts out when he is "awake" because it is when he feels most alive, and the reader is left wondering what Finch is going through. In a review of Niven's novel, Karen Coats talks about how "...it's [made] clear that his mania is neither a choice nor a pose, and that what he calls being 'asleep' is really a depressing episode on his undiagnosed bipolar roller coaster" (365). Finch refuses to get an actual diagnosis, but he knows he probably struggles with bipolar disorder, just like his father. The guidance counselor he talks to mentions this diagnosis, but Finch does not want to get help or seek treatment. Niven shines a light on this issue because Melanie Hom wrote in her article about help-seeking interventions that many "...adolescents with more severe suicidal ideation have lower rates of

help-seeking behaviors and intentions...” (30). Hom later shares, “...males with suicidal ideation appear less likely... to seek help or use services” (32). Niven uses all these truths to her advantage by choosing to make Finch aware of his need for help but reluctant to get any. While it is extremely unfortunate Finch does not receive help, this is the case for most young males experiencing suicidal ideation. Niven uses Finch to show that cases such as his can be different if he received help, which many characters in the novel try to get him to do, but he decides he does not want to be defined by his illness. Despite all Finch is battling with, he still refuses to waste a moment of living, and Niven makes sure her readers are aware of this.

Finch and Violet are both looking for a way out of the darkness. They both want to live, despite where they started when the novel began. Another review discusses how their trips around Indiana throughout the book become a way for them to “...explore all the brightest places that prove there is indeed beauty in life and living” (“All the Bright Places’ Hits...”). Niven has chosen to create a positive narrative in the midst of all the darkness Finch remains in throughout most of the novel. In these moments of finding little pieces of heaven around their state, Violet and Finch are reminded of the beauty of life. Despite Violet losing her sister and experiencing depression and Finch struggling with his mental health, they are both choosing to try to look up out of the darkness. Through spending time together, Niven was able to make this novel about young love. This brings another layer of hope because it opens the door to everything out there waiting if life is given a chance. Both characters are struggling tremendously, but they have each other to lean on for support. In another review, the author says, “[w]hen we see Theodore descending into a smothering depression, or Violet struggling to emerge from hers, the suffering feels authentic...” (Bradman). Many young people who struggle with depression have a

challenging time seeing out of the darkness. The depiction of Violet and Finch in their suffering was real, and stories similar to theirs display what can be on the other side of that dark veil.

Throughout the course of the novel, the reader watches Finch desperately struggle to stay in his “awake” state. He even attends a suicide help group near the end after an attempt to overdose on sleeping pills after which he ran to the hospital to get help once he realized what he had done. No matter what Finch tries, his undiagnosed bipolar disorder is taking over little by little. As the reader watches Finch slowly lose his way, “... the story never breaks sympathy nor champions Finch’s decision, and thus ends up with a strong but subtle message that Finch’s death is the result of a disease” (Coats 365). Niven makes sure Finch’s choice to end his life is not represented in a positive light or celebrated. It is shown for the tragedy it truly is as well as the result of a mental health condition. Even so, the story does not become focused on Finch alone nor his death. Instead, “the book... becomes Violet’s story of survival and recovery, affirming the value of loving deeply, grieving openly, and carrying your light forward” (Coats 365). Through all her time spent with him, Violet sees Finch’s love for life. His undiagnosed condition keeps him from the fullness of the life he hoped for. Because Niven allows Finch to remain undiagnosed, she is able to expose the dangers of not receiving mental healthcare, thus pushing readers to search for a different outcome than what Finch succumbed to.

Allowing readers to experience what Finch and Violet were going through brought more awareness about mental health and treatment. Hom explains how “...increasing one’s knowledge about suicide (e.g., risk factors, warning signs, treatability) will translate to greater intentions to seek treatment and increase actual help-seeking behaviors” (33). Niven makes sure to impart knowledge about suicide and suicidal ideation through characters in the novel which makes her readers more aware of its effects. When readers see Violet talking through her problems to help

her come out of her depression, there is hope. When readers see Finch's refusal to receive treatment led to an unfortunate end that he never wanted, there is a lesson to be learned. In "The Youth Aware of Mental Health Intervention" article, it says "[a]rming youth with better knowledge about mental health and improving knowledge of and willingness to seek out resources may improve mental health outcomes for struggling youth, including reducing suicidal behaviors." (Lindow 106). Readers are able to see Niven do this in both Violet and Finch's life which arms her young adult readers with some knowledge about mental health. In all the ways Niven depicted these characters, readers are made aware of the seriousness of depression, the need to seek treatment, and the tragedy suicide brings.

Niven chose to tell a hard story, but the overall premise was one of hope. The story revealed there could be a way out of depression, and there is freedom from mental health disorders despite the way the story ended. Even though "...the story is dark, [Niven] succeeds in... inculcating a message into the young community. Even though her book is flooded with sadness and anguish, her idea is to let teenagers know that they are not alone in this world and that somehow, there always is light at the end of the tunnel ("All the Bright Places' Hits..."). Telling a story like theirs but leaving the readers with a message of hope is crucial. Niven helped raise awareness for teens struggling with depression and mental health, and she was able to unveil, even through heartbreak and tragedy, there can still be a life full of living and loving people through it all.

Establishing Believability of Mental Health and Suicide Depictions for Destigmatization

In the novel *Shades of Light* by Sharon Brown, the readers walk through the severe depression of the main character, Wren. They are placed inside her head as well as in the heads of the people around her who love and care for her. Brown gives an accurate representation of

this mental health disorder from all perspectives. In terms of Wren and her struggle with depression, the reader finds out she received her diagnosis in high school when she was only sixteen. Showing mental illness being diagnosed and treated is crucial. Brown easily normalizes mental health by demonstrating the doctor helping Wren come to terms with her diagnosis. Brown writes “‘There’s no shame in this,’ the doctor had said, handing her the first of many prescriptions. ‘If you were diabetic, you would need insulin’” (37). Displaying how someone suffering from a mental illness, namely anxiety and depression, is just as common as being diagnosed with diabetes is such a powerful message Brown delivers in a few lines. Wren’s parents are even willing to be there for their daughter in any way they can, revealing Wren’s diagnosis as normalized and accepted from the moment she receives it.

As the book starts, Wren is in her twenties, and the reader finds out she has checked herself into a mental facility. Brown deciding on this narrative for her character is exponential for someone who is struggling with a mental disorder. The stigma around mental health facilities exists because some think they are for crazy people and lunatics. Again, the article from Melanie Hom shares, “...positive attitudes toward help-seeking appear to significantly predict intentions to seek care among individuals at elevated suicide risk,” so when Wren decides to check herself into a facility because she is scared of what she might do if she remains alone, it is a huge step forward for the reader (32). Wren is not forced to go; Wren is not ambushed by an intervention. Wren chooses to go because she knows getting help is what is best for her, and this realization is imperative to her health. Hom states, “[c]onnecting suicidal individuals to appropriate mental health care services is a key component of suicide prevention efforts” (28). By Wren seeking out her own help, mental health services are seen as available to those who need it. It is necessary to normalize seeking treatment, and Brown does this by having Wren find help for herself.

While at the mental facility, Wren does see several people who she feels need much more help than her which brings her shame because she is not able to get a handle on her own depression. She feels as though she has no right to be depressed because she has not experienced enough hardships. She has not had a terrible upbringing; she was never abused or in poverty. Brown uses these thoughts to help display feelings many with depression may have. Some people think something terrible has to happen in order for them to be depressed. Brown uses Wren to show depression can affect anyone from any walk of life. There does not have to be shame attached to it. During her time there, she begins to see all of the patients as her “companion[s] in misfortune” (Brown 60). She takes this thought with her throughout the rest of the novel after she is released from the facility. She finds herself seeing other people in the outside world who may also be her companion in misfortune, struggling with something underneath the surface, sending the message that mental health issues touch many of our lives.

Brown portrays the symptoms of depression accurately and vividly. Wren experiences panic attacks and the reader is placed right into the moment with her. The way Brown words the text makes the reader feel just as lost and disoriented as Wren is feeling. There is a sense of confusion and breathlessness while reading the text, and this mirrors the panic attack Wren is having at the moment. When Wren is released from the mental facility, she experiences another trauma right when she gets home: she is informed that her cat, which was the only reason she had to get up in the morning, had died while she was away. This distress sends Wren back into depression. In the article “Depression in Young People,” author Jane Burns said, “[f]ollowing a negative life event... an individual might describe him- or herself as inadequate, the world as unfair, and the future as hopeless” (94). Wren begins to feel these things immediately after finding out what happened. Although she is coherent enough to call her mom and tell her what

happened, she can barely speak, but she tells her mom she is afraid again. She feels the darkness consuming her, and she cannot see a way out. Since she is completely alone, and her mom lives several states away, they arrange for a family member who is nearby to get her while her mom stays on the phone until help arrives. The entire time her mom is talking to her on the phone, Wren is silent. She cannot speak. She cannot function. Her depression is debilitating, but she once again reached out for help. What is even better is that help came. There was no hesitation for her family to do everything they could to keep Wren safe. Brown could have let Wren end her life right there. Brown could have let the narrative tell readers how terrible thing after terrible thing happens and there is no way out but through death. Instead, Brown's narrative tells us that terrible things happen, and sometimes they happen when people do not have the capacity to deal with it, but there is a way out and there are people out there who will love and help however they can. Over the next few days, Wren does not speak at all, and she sleeps most of the time. Little by little, as she starts staying out of her room for longer periods of time, her words come back to her, her passions come back to her, her appetite comes back to her. Brown exhibits how much depression affects our executive functioning because there was not much Wren could do other than breathe and exist the first few days.

Brown works on eliminating the shame associated with mental health as well, and she does this from a Christian perspective. What the reader first sees is Wren confiding in her youth group, and they discourage her when she mentions her depression. They

...insisted that the depressed and anxious should be able to "pray their way out of it" or "memorize more Scripture" and be cured. That's what one small group leader had told her when she confided during her junior year of college that she was struggling to cope.

“Anxiety and depression are all about a lack of faith,” the leader said. If she would just repent and trust Jesus, she would be fine. (Brown 37-38).

Brown creates this belief here that if Wren were truly a Christian, she would not be depressed. This thought process causes Wren to feel ashamed, not wanting to share with anyone anymore. She refuses to talk about her diagnosis with her neighbors or coworkers. No one knows she goes through severe bouts of depression except her parents and her best friend. Many Christians believe mental illness is a problem that should be prayed away or gotten over easily if one genuinely believes in God, and this is an unfortunate belief for Christians to have. Brown reveals how wrong this is and how harmful this thinking could be to someone who suffers from mental health disorders. If Wren had not already been diagnosed, she might have feared going to see someone about it because of feeling disgraced by people around her who should have been encouraging her and supporting her. Her parents even feel ashamed to tell people in their church congregation. Wren’s dad, a pastor, and her mom discuss how they are unable to tell their church friends Wren is in a mental institution because they would be judged for what their daughter is going through. They insist they could put her on the prayer chain “if she’d been hospitalized with gallstones or appendicitis or something...” (Brown 42). Instead, they decide to say she is stressed because “‘Stress’ was a far more socially acceptable label than ‘nervous breakdown.’”(43) To see these reactions and fears from people in the church is eye-opening to believers to be careful and mindful of how mental health is treated. Doing this will help remove mental health stigma.

Brown juxtaposes this belief with members of the church reacting in the exact opposite way after her brief stay at the mental facility. While there, her pastor, Hannah Allen, comes to visit her. When Wren and Hannah visit, there is nothing but compassion and love for all she is going through. There is no shame or telling her to pray more. Instead, Wren’s feelings are

validated as she is prayed for. Her pastor is kind and compassionate to her and all who are around her. In an article about Sick-Lit, it is believed “...religious factors help young people manage death-related thoughts in their search for existential meaning, [so] its absence may be dangerous” (Testoni et. al. 162). Being sure to weave God and his unending love into Wren’s story is essential for readers who are exposed to this. Readers see this even more when Wren begins to live with her aunt, Kim, who is heavily involved in church ministry. Kim, though, not only takes her in with love, but Kim shares her own story and struggles with depression, anxiety, and panic attacks due to the loss of her son. She reveals the time she too spent in a mental facility during her time of loss. Kim, in her wisdom and experience, is able to help Wren through her own symptoms. Brown presents the ugly and hard parts linked with mental illness, but she covers all those parts in love, showing mental illness does not have to define anyone. Wren is nurtured back to health with the loving arms of the people around her who guide her in wisdom and with Scripture.

With this in mind, Brown lets it be known the only way through mental illness is faith in Christ. This idea does not mean people can pray, and all will be gone and healed. It does mean God will hold them through it. Brown displays this with a story of Elijah in the Bible saying,

...the gutsy, victorious prophet [was] on the run, exhausted and dejected, feeling abandoned and overwhelmed, wanting to die. He was finished. It was all too much for him. And God met him in his despair with tender compassion, not condemnation or disappointment” (Brown 131).

Wren’s mother is encouraged by this story. God does not condemn anyone when they are sad and brokenhearted. He meets them where they are. This truth is a paramount reminder Brown includes in Wren’s story. Wren continues to slowly pick up the pieces of her life. Even though it

is hard, she keeps at it. She does her best to make amends with the people she has hurt. When tragedy strikes Wren toward the end of the novel, she is hurt again and goes through the motions for six weeks of her life while she is trying to cope with another loss, but she has a support system around her. Brown writes Wren in such low places in her life, but there is never hopelessness. She shows bouts of depression may continue to occur at various times throughout her life, and how Wren gets through it. This representation helps people to see what it looks like to experience depression but to also make it through. When Wren reached out to people, they did all they could to hold onto her through her darkness, so she would not get lost in it. At the center of it all was Christ. Focusing on Him and His Word helped bring her stability. She was not shamed for having anxiety and depression, she was not instantly cured, but through all her heartbreak, she found a way to lean into Jesus and let Him hold her. This portrayal is necessary to discuss because the only consistent hope anyone can count on is the promise of Jesus never leaving us. Brown is able to share this as readers watch Wren go through the troubles and tragedies of life over and over again, which leaves the reader with an important reminder of the hope which can be sought through our own struggles with mental health.

Conclusion

Clearly, the way the narrative is written matters in any story, especially in ones discussing the serious topics of mental health issues, seeking treatment for poor mental health, and suicide or suicidal ideation. Authors who choose to write about this subject must do so carefully and with truth and accuracy in mind, yet authors must not seek to only entertain their readers when discussing topics such as this. It has been seen how harmful this can be as with *13 Reasons Why*. This novel, while starting from a good place, turned into a catastrophic telling of a young girl's suicide which may have caused others due to the Werther effect and the

hopelessness Hannah experiences. Because nothing seems to go right for her, it is made to seem as though death is the only answer, and young people who are exposed to this can be influenced to follow the same path.

On the other hand, there are responsible ways to tell stories dealing with poor mental health and suicide as seen with *All the Bright Places* and *Shades of Light*. Both of these stories have their own darkness in copious amounts. Finch in *All the Bright Places* even loses his battle with the darkness and takes his own life. In *Shades of Light*, nothing is going right for Wren and her life continues to spiral downward into her own darkness as well. However, both of these stories are laced with hope in the midst of darkness which ignites the Papageno effect. There is light throughout the story which brings the characters out of the darkness surrounding them, even if only for a moment. The titles of these stories even focus on light and brightness because the characters are searching for the light. Even though Finch does not make it in the end, he finds hope in his experiences that he wanted to live for. Even though Wren loses a great deal in her life, one thing she does not lose is her hope. Hope is what brings these stories into the light, and this hope is shared with the readers.

Stories centered on darkness and nothing else will produce nothing else. The readers exposed to this may be hurt, brought down, and taught to live in the same way as those characters in that story. Stories showing how the light is not overcome by darkness will help readers to feel the same and live with hope. Stories showing there is a way out and there is a possibility of a bright future are vital. Because of stories like Finch's or Wren's, writers may be able to convince someone to seek help. Writers may be able to help someone see hope. Writers may be able to reveal the light at the end of the tunnel. An author's words could be the difference between life and death, and the hope is that their words will always bring life.

Creative Manuscript

The Fadeaway

By Ashlee Garcia

Chapter 1

For Jayden Walker, the panic attacks had started again in these last few weeks. His face tilted toward the sky, seeking the sun's warmth, but the cold refused to leave his heart. With his heart beating rapidly in his chest, he paused from his morning run to look all around him, taking in the familiarity of his surroundings. He tried to slow his breathing, anxiousness filling his soul and threatening to choke the life out of him, for today would be his last day here for a while.

He was going to miss this place.

Iris Cove, Texas had been Jayden's home his entire life. He had never known anything else, yet tomorrow he would travel almost fourteen hundred miles to his new home in California. He wouldn't see this place again for the next four months, and the thought of that was daunting. He had come to know everything in this town like the back of his hand. The thud of his basketball on the pavement here had become one of his favorite sounds. He spent countless hours dribbling a ball on his route every morning, memorizing the cracks in the sidewalk and the dips in the road. This route had watched him evolve from the scrawny preteen who needed to practice his handles to the nearly 6'3" college freshman with an athletic build and expert skills. This route had watched him grow up, and he wasn't ready to leave it.

As he leaned against the pole at the crosswalk, he was determined to catch his breath. He counted slowly in his head, backwards from ten. That's the breathing exercise the doctor had recommended when things got like this, wasn't it? He counted slowly a few times through, until his breathing returned to normal. He stood tall then, continuing on his way before anyone saw.

This morning, he jogged down Main Street with his basketball a little slower, still unable to shake his sadness. Coldplay blared through his headphones, and he hoped it would bring up his mood. The wind blew through his short soft brown curls that bounced with every step he took

as the sun beat down on his dark skin. Even the air and sunshine here was familiar to him. Nothing about this place surprised him anymore, but come tomorrow, he would be in a new town where the air might feel different, and the sun might not beam as brightly. He would have to find a new morning route and memorize new terrain. There was something exhilarating and terrifying about that, but Jayden was unsure which emotion was more dominant. He tried to focus on the good things ahead, on his freshman year at UCLA, on his place on the basketball team as a mighty Bruin, but the gloom lingered. Right now, he would put all his focus and energy into this last day as he soaked it all in one more time.

As Jayden jogged down the street, he saw many familiar faces. That's how it was in a small town. He smiled and greeted a passerby as he dribbled the ball gracefully in the direction of the General Store, the first stop on his farewell tour. As Jayden walked up to the front, he glanced up at the old sign with the letters worn out and faded. When lit up at night, it read "General Store" because Mr. Jenkins, the owner, never bothered to fix it. Jayden stopped at the decaying bench just outside the shop and placed his ball down on the bench before walking inside.

The bell jingled as the door opened, signaling his arrival. The kid at the counter, Tyler, looked over at Jayden for a brief moment and nodded his head at him before looking down at something behind the counter. Tyler hung around a different crowd than Jayden which meant they'd never gotten a chance to talk, but that didn't faze him. Jayden had the kind of charisma that enchanted most people he came in contact with, so he approached the counter with a friendly smile on his face. When Tyler didn't look up, Jayden peaked over the counter to see that Tyler was reading a comic book: *The Silver Surfer*. Jayden's eyebrows perked up.

"Dude, great choice. I've always loved his stories with the Fantastic Four, though." Jayden paused as Tyler finally looked up at him, this time with a baffled expression, but he

continued anyway. “I’m all for those redemption storylines, and *The Silver Surfer* is one of my favorites. How are you liking it so far?” Tyler seemed too stunned to speak for a moment.

“I- I like it,” he finally stammered out. He shook his head as if to shake off his confusion. “He’s a favorite of mine too, so that’s cool that you like him too.” He still looked taken aback as he went on. “I’d love to talk more about it, but I doubt you came in to talk to me about comics. Were you looking for anything in particular?”

“Yeah. I’m actually looking for Mr. Jenkins. Is he around this morning?”

“Yeah, he’s here. He’s in the back,” Tyler said as he nodded his head and pointed in the direction Jayden should follow.

Jayden turned to walk away from the counter. Before he got too far, he glanced back and said, “Thanks, man. Let’s talk comics another time.” Tyler nodded enthusiastically before turning his attention back to *The Silver Surfer*.

Jayden smiled. He had won another one over. It was never hard for him, really. He was kind and personable, and people felt comfortable around him. He made friends easily. In fact, that was why he had become so close to Mr. Jenkins. After spending so much time here and talking to Mr. Jenkins more often, they became fast friends. He wasn’t just the guy who gave him his first job or an elder in the neighborhood. Jenkins had become like a second father to Jayden these last several years. The thought of leaving tomorrow weighed heavily on him. As he walked toward the back of the store to find Mr. Jenkins, he sighed, wishing he had just a little more time. This was only his first stop, and already this farewell tour was turning out to be more difficult than he imagined it would be.

Soon, Jayden pushed the doors open to the back of the store where the stockroom was located. Sound came from the back corner where Mr. Jenkins was probably shuffling around in

there. Jayden called out for him. “Jenkins?” It was the name that Jayden had come to use for him after all the time they had spent together. “Jenkins, you in here? It’s Jay!” he called a little louder this time. Jenkins was hard of hearing, and he didn’t want to startle him when he approached.

“Jay?” a muffled voice called back. “I’m by the canned goods.”

Jayden headed in that direction. After all, he knew his way around this stockroom quite well since he spent so many summers and weekends working here. He walked past broken-down cardboard boxes and pallets with new inventory before Jenkins finally stood before him. His hair was graying, and he stood with a bit of a hunch, but he was still fit and healthy for a man of seventy-three.

Jenkins looked up just as Jayden approached. “Hey, Son,” he said. His voice was gravelly after many years of smoking. “To what do I owe this surprise visit? You hardly ever come on back to the supply room.” He had a suspicious look on his face.

“I just came to see you, actually.” Jayden smirked.

“Me?” Shock covered Jenkins’ face. “What’s so special about me?”

“Well, it’s my last day in town. I’m headed out first thing in the morning, so I couldn’t leave without coming in to say goodbye.”

“Well, I’ll be. You’re really getting out of here, huh?” Jenkins replied.

“Yessir. About 1500 miles out west to Los Angeles.”

“Good for you, Son. Not many people ‘round here go as far as you. It’s about time the rest of the world sees how special you are. I appreciate you coming by and letting me know.”

“That’s not the only reason I stopped by.” Jayden looked down, surprised by emotions that threatened to spill out. He composed himself before continuing. “I also wanted to thank you for always being there. You’ve always looked out for me, especially when I was going through a

rough time. You've always been someone I could turn to, and I'll forever be grateful to you. I couldn't leave before I told you that."

"Aw, shucks, Jay. Don't come on over here and get all soft on me. I wasn't prepared to come into work and cry today." Jenkins had a playful grin on his face, but he looked away as he wiped at his eyes. "You're a wonderful boy," he began again. "Ever since you were little, I knew you were something special. Those folks out in LA don't know that they've got the best of Iris Cove headed their way."

Jayden chuckled. "I don't know about all that, Jenkins." Jayden instinctively began taking out the supplies and organizing them on the shelves. "Just like old times, huh?" Jayden looked over to Mr. Jenkins who had also resumed stacking supplies in the back.

Jenkins smiled. "You always were the best worker I ever had... which is why I know you're gonna do so great over there." Jenkins paused his stacking and looked over at Jayden. "Are you excited?"

"Honestly... part of me is a little nervous. Iris Cove is all I've ever known. UCLA is going to be a big change."

Jenkins sighed. "Well, you're sure gonna be missed 'round here." Jenkins was nodding his head in agreement with his own statement. He cared for all the neighborhood kids; he encouraged all of them to do well in school and stay out of trouble, but he had a special place in his heart for Jayden. So many kids came and went out of this town in all the years Jenkins had run the store, but Jayden had been different, "one-of-a-kind" Jenkins always told him, because he never hesitated to help anyone in need. When Jenkins had lost his wife, Jayden stuck around, helped him with the store, and gave him the encouragement to keep living life when he was having a hard time seeing the light. Jayden gave all he could to support those around him, even

when he was feeling down himself. Time and time again, Jenkins would say that kids like him didn't come around very often, and the town just wouldn't be the same once he was gone.

"I'm definitely going to miss it here," Jayden admitted, "but despite all my nerves, I am excited for what's next." Jayden smiled as he continued working with the supplies.

"Now, I don't want to cause you any uneasiness, but... what about Gracie?" Jenkins asked. "How are you two lovebirds doing with all this college business? It's a big change for both of y'all."

Jayden hesitated. This was a part of the move that he didn't want to think about. It had been almost two years since he and Grace had started dating. He had never envisioned this part, though – leaving her. It was too hard to bear. He sighed heavily.

"We're doing okay. She's staying nearby and going to a university just a few hours from here. Neither of us are looking forward to being apart, but she's always been so supportive of my dreams, so we're going to try to make it work."

"I remember the first day you saw her in here all those years ago. You were hooked right before my eyes. She's been just right for you since that first moment. God knows exactly what we need exactly when we need it, and God knew you'd need Gracie in your life at some point."

Jayden cringed at this mention with a slight pause in his movements. Anger bubbled deep within him, but he tried to shake it off as Jenkins went on. "I've seen you two together these last couple years, and it's brought nothing but joy to my heart."

"She's just... amazing. She's been there for me through everything and has helped me through so much. I honestly don't know where I'd be without her today."

"God is good, isn't he?"

Jayden cringed again, desperate to change the subject. Jenkins moved on to opening another box, oblivious to Jayden's discomfort who remained silent, quiet anger masking his face.

He looked around the room, lost for words. Jenkins always tried his best to keep the storeroom uncluttered, but it was a cramped area, and it was only getting smaller, caving in on him, with all this God talk. He had to get out of here.

Jayden stopped stacking the supplies and wiped his hands on his jeans. "Right. Well... I've gotta run. I have a few other places to stop by today. This was only the first." Jayden kept his smile on his face, not wanting Jenkins to know he was uncomfortable.

"Well, come on over here." Jenkins opened his arms for an embrace, and Jayden went to him willingly. Jenkins whispered, "Knock 'em dead over there, Son. They won't know what hit 'em." Then he gave Jayden a few pats on the back.

"I'll do my best, sir." Jayden pulled back to look at Jenkins, and the smile covering his face was now coupled with sadness in his eyes. Jayden was sure that same sadness was mirrored in his own expression. He was going to miss Jenkins more than he knew.

With one more pat on the back from Mr. Jenkins, Jayden turned on his heels and headed back out of the stockroom. A little piece of him stayed behind, and it hurt more than he thought it would. As he walked through the storefront, he passed the front counter where he gave Tyler a wave before exiting the store. He covered his eyes with his hands to shield them from the bright sunshine as he grabbed his ball off the bench and headed to his next stop. The heat beating down on him, now that the sun was higher in the sky, burned his skin. He was used to this Texas heat, but he couldn't help but feel like it was a warning to him of what was to come.

He wouldn't end this day unscathed.

Chapter 2

The shine coming off the lake when the sun beamed high in the sky had always been a draw for everyone in town. It looked like millions of diamonds spread across the expanse of several basketball stadiums. The cool breeze coming off the lake now was a welcome relief from the stifling summer air Jayden breathed in on his way here. This lake was just another thing he was going to miss about home. The uneasy feeling he'd had earlier today returned, but he did his best to push that feeling back down, letting the breeze wash over him as he continued his walk toward the lake. Maybe this farewell tour wasn't the best idea, but he'd already started, and he never backed out of a commitment.

This place was one of Jayden's favorite things about Iris Cove, especially since there was a court placed alongside the lake; it brought a calming presence to him whenever he was near it. As he made his way to the lakefront, he heard the scuff of tennis shoes and laughter, seeing that several of his friends were already shooting around. His best friend, Cole Matthews, was among them. Cole always stood out with his long dreadlocks placed in a man bun on his tall six-foot-four frame. Most of the guys on the court were his former teammates – some were seniors who would also be taking off to college soon, and some were the younger players, ready to take on a new basketball season and their next year of high school here in town. One of the guys made a play to drive down the middle before doing a pump fake and then sinking a fadeaway jumper. The guys on the other team groaned, and Jayden broke out into a smile. There was nothing like the feeling of being on the court with these guys.

“Man, the fadeaway is weak, Jeff,” Jayden called out to the group. The guys halted their playing as they noticed Jayden walking up to the court, and they made their way over to him.

“Well, well, well,” Cole responded. “Look who decided to grace us with his presence?” Cole smiled as he and Jayden gripped hands before pulling each other into a one-armed hug.

One of the guys, Tim with his mop-head and clowning attitude, held up an imaginary microphone to his mouth and began speaking like an announcer. “Ladies and Gentlemen, that roar of the crowd you hear is for none other than Iris Cove High's own State Championship winner and this year's MVP...” He paused before extending the next words as he said them. “Jaaayyydeeen Waaaalkeeeerrrr!” Tim, along with some of the other guys, began imitating the noise and roar of a large crowd. Everyone started laughing while giving him a round of applause.

Jayden laughed right along with them and shoved Tim playfully. “Cut it out, you guys.” All of them were still laughing, and Jayden shook his head.

“On your farewell tour, already?” Cole asked.

“Yeah. Just wanted to come say goodbye.” Jayden looked around at the group of guys, the team he led for the last two years, and they all stared back at him. They had all been far from champions when their coach made him team captain in his junior year. They had grown together in that time, pushed each other to be better players, practiced more hours than they spent at home, and now they were going their separate ways. These guys had looked up to him for years, but what they didn't know is that Jayden looked up to them just the same. They had taught him so much in these last couple of years as they built a winning team together with their coach. They had become his family, and he wasn't ready to leave them yet.

Jeff spoke up next. “So, when are you leaving then, Jay?”

A tinge of sadness came from Jeff's voice. He didn't expect this goodbye to be as hard as the last one, but it was turning out to be that way.

“I’m headed out tomorrow morning.” Groans erupted from all around, but none were louder than Cole’s. “Come on, guys. Stop,” Jayden said, shaking his head again. “I’m not the big deal you guys make me out to be.”

“Oh, please,” Jeff responded. “Don’t sell yourself short. You only took the losing team of our school, for who knows how many years, and made us all state champions!”

“Nah, man. It’s called a team for a reason,” Jayden countered. “No one person can carry the team on his own. It took all of us.” Jayden gestured round the circle of guys.

Tim chimed in this time. “I’m sorry, but have you ever heard of LeBron James? He literally did just that, and you did the same.” Tim made his voice high-pitched and squealed, teasingly, “You’re our... hero!” He reached his arm out toward Jayden who quickly slapped it away while laughing.

“Y’all all a mess,” Jayden replied.

“Why don’t you take this mess on in a little pick-up game?” Cole asked.

A chorus of “yeahs” went around the group, everyone nodding their head in agreement.

“I wish I could.” Jayden lifted his hand to rub the back of his neck. “I’ve got a lot of things on my to-do list today.”

Tim walked over and put his hand on his shoulder. Feigning tears, he said, “Not even one... last... game...?” He was hanging onto Jayden now, almost falling to the ground. “Please, Jayden.”

Jayden chuckled and pushed him away. “Get off me, man. I’ll play if you get up off the floor and stop crying like a baby.” Cheers came from around the group.

“Awe, yeah. I knew I’d get him,” Tim boasted. The guys laughed again, and they all made their way onto the court.

They picked up their rhythm easily as a team. These guys had always been the best to play with, the best to lead. Playing with them was like a symphony. Everyone had their part to play, Jayden conducted, and together they created the most beautiful melody on the court. Every time they played, whether in the gym for practice, in a stadium for the championship, or on the lakeside court for fun, magic surrounded them. These guys had filled his time in high school with so much, and soon, most of them would all be off in different directions, leaving him empty.

Basketball had saved him these last couple of years. He poured his heart and soul into his time on the court, and the guys around him all played a huge part in making him as successful as he was. He truly knew it was a team that made the win, and he had been captain of the best team out there. What would his new team be like? Jayden wasn't worried about making friends or fitting in, but he hoped that playing with this new set of guys would be just as rewarding as what he'd done on the court with these guys. He made one final shot, a bucket from inside the paint, and then called the game. They hadn't been playing for points. They never needed to. They just played to play, but Jayden had to get going.

"Alright, guys. That's it for me." Jayden started to say his goodbyes to all the guys on the court, and he saved Cole for last. His plans for the rest of the day wouldn't include Cole, so this was their goodbye. They both looked at each other, sad smiles filling their faces before they reached out for an embrace. "I'm gonna miss you, man," Jayden said, patting him on the back.

"Me too, bro," Cole responded. He pulled away and looked at Jayden again. "Don't be a stranger, now, ya hear?" Cole put a heavy twang in his accent as he said this. He always had to cut the tension whenever things got serious. Jayden loved that about him.

Laughing, Jayden said, “Wouldn’t think of it.” He tried to add the same silly accent, but it came out British which is not what he had intended at all. They both laughed at each other, and the heaviness from a moment before was gone.

“Okay guys,” Tim interrupted. “I hate to break up the love fest, but y’all are standing right in the middle of the court, and some of us actually came to play ball.”

Jayden and Cole pulled apart and laughed before they both shoved Tim, nearly knocking him over. All the guys were laughing now as a bunch of playful shoves took place around the circle. Everyone was reluctant for this goodbye, but the time had come.

“I’ll catch you guys later. Take care of yourselves. Y’all are gonna kill it wherever you go, whatever you do.”

“No better way to end this than with final words of wisdom from our captain,” Jeff said. He stood at attention, and a couple of other guys did the same. There was never a lack of laughs with this group, and Jayden let out another one.

Jayden saluted. “At ease, soldiers.” Jayden backed away and off the court, as the guys relaxed their postures and laughed. They turned back to their game after giving Jayden some final waves. He left them behind them, hating the feeling that overcame him. With every goodbye he spoke, the weight on his shoulders pushed him down even further.

Chapter 3

Charlie watched Jayden turn the corner and head toward their house, basketball bouncing in hand as usual. He could not believe that tomorrow he would be driving his boy off to college. It seemed like just yesterday was the first time that he was meeting Olivia and Jayden when they were just seven after only dating their mother for a couple of months. They had come a long way since that first meeting, and now they were both getting ready to leave the house. It was a bittersweet feeling. Time had flown by too quickly, and he wasn't ready for them to leave the nest.

Jayden was just jogging up the driveway as Charlie snapped out of his walk down memory lane. Jayden held the ball after its last bounce and greeted Charlie with a smile.

“Jay Man,” Charlie said to him. “I was just getting ready to load some of your boxes in the car. You arrived just in time.” Charlie clapped him on the back, and they began walking toward the garage together. Jayden groaned.

“Dang it. I thought I had stayed out long enough to miss that part.” Jayden gave Charlie a side glance and smirked. “Are you sure you and mom can't do this part on your own?”

Charlie laughed. “Did you just volunteer your mother for physical labor because your 18-year-old self is too lazy to lend a hand?” Charlie playfully grabbed Jayden's arms, as if placing him under arrest which caused the basketball to fall to the floor and roll into the grass. He then pulled Jayden closer to restrain him as he began pinching him in the sides.

Jayden began laughing and trying to get out of his grasp. “I think I did.” They were both laughing now. “Mom is strong.” He tried to catch his breath. “She can... handle... a few boxes.” He barely got out that sentence between laughs.

Charlie and Jayden always played around like this. Charlie hoped they always would, no matter how old Jayden got. They teased each other relentlessly, all in good fun, until they were both out of breath from laughter. This time was no different, and Charlie was going to miss this.

Jayden couldn't get out of Charlie's grasp now. Even though Charlie was only five-foot-ten and stocky, Charlie had better upper body strength than Jayden, and his height never kept him from overpowering him easily. Charlie held him tightly and said, "Take back offering your mother up for manual labor when you are able-bodied enough to do it yourself." Charlie chuckled as Jayden kept laughing and shaking his head. "No?" Charlie was smiling from ear-to-ear now, and Jayden laughed while still trying to get out of his grasp. Charlie pinched Jayden's sides, making him squirm and scream out.

"Okay, okay! I give!" Jayden bent over in laughter once Charlie let him go. "You win, like always. I'll do the manual labor, so mom doesn't have to." Jayden's laughter died down, and Charlie pulled him into a side hug.

"That's what I thought you'd say. Now let's get to work!" He plopped a big wet kiss on his cheek, just to mess with him one last time for good measure. Charlie laughed when he heard Jayden's "bleck" in response as he wiped the remains of Charlie's kiss from his cheek. He led Jayden through the open garage and into the front room which was furnished with tan and brown sectionals. A large window had sunlight beaming through, shining on the bookcase Charlie had built which held a plethora of DVDs. Throughout the last week, Jayden had placed the majority of the boxes that were heading to Los Angeles with him in this room so they could pack up the truck easily. Boxes were on the floor, placed on different parts of the couch, and even sat on top of Charlie's Laz-E-Boy. Jayden wasn't taking too much, but he had accumulated more boxes

than Charlie had expected. As Charlie looked around the front room, he began thinking about how to best pack up everything so it would all fit.

“I thought you weren’t taking a lot,” Charlie teased.

“My shoes took up more room than I thought they would.”

“How many of your shoes do you actually need?”

“All of them.” Jayden replied, scoffing, as if the answer was obvious while gesturing to himself. “I know I make this swag look effortless, but it takes effort to perfect fits like this.”

Charlie shoved Jayden, laughing. “Just be quiet and start grabbing some boxes.”

They worked quietly for the first few minutes, each of them focused on the task at hand. As Jayden reached for another box from the front room on his second trip inside, Charlie studied him again. His boy had grown too quickly right before his eyes. He was strong and kind; he was everything a father could wish for, but something in Jayden’s eyes scared him sometimes. Even now, as Charlie watched Jayden work on packing up the car, Jayden’s lively eyes glazed over, going through the motions. As they walked from the front room toward the car, Charlie knew that the playful moments they shared earlier were now forgotten, and Charlie wondered if Jayden was worrying about all that was to come for him in the next few months. It wasn’t often that Jayden went quiet or zoned out, but Charlie had noticed him doing it a lot more recently in the last few months, and it worried him. Jayden dropped off a box at the car and turned to head inside for more. Charlie reached out to stop him before he got too far. Putting his hand on Jayden’s arm, he gripped it softly. Jayden paused and looked back at him.

“Jay Man.” Charlie smiled reassuringly.

“Yeah, Charlie?”

“Come sit down here for a second.” Charlie pat the bed of the truck, and they both made the effort to hop up. Jayden’s tall frame had no problem getting on the bed of the truck, but Charlie struggled for a few seconds with his shorter legs before getting up back there. Jayden faced forward, looking down at the driveway and into nowhere. Charlie just watched him for a few moments before asking, “What are you thinking about, Son?”

“Nothing, really.”

“Are you thinking about school?”

“I don’t know. I guess.” Jayden looked at his hands and started picking at his thumb. Jayden sighed heavily, and Charlie was reminded of the little boy that was afraid of walking into his first day of basketball practice with his team in middle school, nervous because he didn’t know what to expect or if it would be like playing with his friends at the park. Jayden was not the fearful middle schooler that he used to be, but Charlie sensed some of that same hesitation he had so many years ago.

“Are you having second thoughts?” Charlie watched Jayden fidget, still picking at his thumb, lost in his own world. “Jay?”

“Hmmm?” He looked up, seeming to come back to the conversation, but his eyes were still far away. “Oh. No. No second thoughts.”

“It’s a big change, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it is.” Jayden looked out across the driveway again. He shook his head, and his eyes engaged Charlie’s. Jayden smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes like it normally did. “But it’ll be great! Sometimes things have to change, but this is a great opportunity. Playing at UCLA has always been the dream, hasn’t it?”

“You tell me, Son.” Charlie loved watching Jayden play. He’d become magic on the court over these last few years, but Jayden playing wasn’t what Charlie needed. “I just need you to be happy with your decision here. Whether you play or not, your mom and I just want you to be happy. You know that, don’t you?” Charlie searched his eyes, hoping to see Jayden’s true feelings there, but Jayden looked away.

“Of course, I know that. And I am happy. UCLA is the dream. It is.” He seemed to say that last part like he was trying to convince himself. “Sure, leaving home is going to be hard, but going through hard things is a part of life. Diamonds wouldn’t exist without being crushed by tons of pressure. Beautiful things are born out of the tough times.”

“Yes, they are.” Charlie agreed. Jayden always seemed so optimistic despite body language that said otherwise. Jayden could inspire anyone with his words. That’s part of the reason why he had been such a great captain, leading his team to victory after victory. He spoke life into his team, and they followed him without question. His superior skills on the court didn’t hurt either, but his words always moved others. Charlie just hoped that Jayden honestly believed all that he was saying. Sometimes he wasn’t sure.

Charlie reached his hand out and placed it on Jayden’s knee, shaking it. This brought Jayden’s gaze back to Charlie. “You sure everything is alright, Jay?”

Jayden laughed. “Yes. Everything is alright.” Jayden pushed Charlie’s hand away and hopped off the bed of the truck. “Stop getting all sappy on me. I’m meeting with Grace soon, and we’ve still got work to do.” He motioned for Charlie to follow him in. “Time to get back to work, Dad.” With that, Jayden smiled once more before turning toward the house to grab the last of the boxes left in the front room.

Charlie smiled. Jayden didn't always call him "Dad," but every time he did, Charlie couldn't help but cherish it. For the longest time, neither Jayden or Olivia ever spoke that word when it came to him, yet slowly but surely, they both had come to see Charlie as their father, and he thanked God for that blessing every day, for blending their family despite the bumps in the road along the way. Jayden and Olivia were his greatest treasures, and he saw them as his own. He did from the moment he knew he'd planned to spend the rest of his life with their mom and with them as his family. Now, all he wanted was for his family to be safe, happy, and healthy.

Right now, Charlie wasn't sure if that was the case for Jayden. He was saying all the right things, but Charlie wasn't sure he believed them coming from Jayden. Behind Jayden's smile, Charlie was convinced that there was something more, something he wasn't saying. However, there was nothing he could really do about it at that moment. Until Jayden was ready to talk about whatever he was thinking and feeling, Charlie would hope and pray that Jayden would find his way out of whatever he was going through.

Guide him, Lord. Keep him in your arms. Charlie quickly sent up that short prayer before making his way inside to finish packing with Jayden.

Chapter 4

Jayden looked down at their intertwined fingers as he and Grace walked to their favorite pizza place in town. They had decided to make this night just like any other, but Jayden couldn't help but think of these next few hours without a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. His talk with Charlie only reminded him of all the fears and anxieties that came with the move tomorrow. He'd dodged his questions easily enough, but they'd left him in a funk. Now, on his last night with Grace, he wanted to memorize the feel of her hand in his, this hand that had become an extension of him, knowing this would be the last time they would hold each other like this for a while. The pain that had been tugging on his heart throughout the day grew exponentially at this thought. How could he be leaving Grace after all this time? *Was* he making the right decision?

A sigh escaped from her lips, and in that sigh, he heard all the apprehension he had been feeling. Grace stopped and pulled Jayden in for a hug, placing her head where it landed over his heart. Jayden reciprocated the hug and held her tighter. Jayden pulled back to catch a glimpse of her beautiful face, of those hazel eyes with gold flecks in them that he had spent countless hours memorizing over these last few years. Once his eyes met hers, they were noticeably tinged with sadness, knowing that their time was running out.

"What are you thinking about, pretty girl?" Jayden held their eye contact, trying to see what else laid behind those eyes.

"Just wishing tonight didn't have to end." She looked away then, out at the trees that lined the walkway; they twinkled with lights. Jayden didn't like the sadness that had now seeped into her voice; each note that rang out left his heart a little more bruised. As they began walking again through the square, he studied her features, searching the wrinkles in her forehead or the

downturn of her mouth for what she wasn't saying. "We both knew this time would come, but it feels like it kind of snuck up on us anyway."

"I feel the same way. Maybe this is a bad idea," Jayden confessed. He could feel his pulse rising, his heartbeat quickening. The thoughts of all that he was leaving behind left him flustered. "Maybe I'm not supposed to go. How can I wake up tomorrow and leave you?"

"But you're not leaving *me*." Her gaze was back on his. "You're just going off to do amazing things at UCLA, and I wouldn't have it any other way." Her eyes grew determined; her lips settled into a straight line. "Don't ever think this is not where you're meant to go."

"I know that... I just hate this." He looked down at their hands again, his thumb absentmindedly brushing hers. Grace stopped in her tracks, and her free hand found its way up to his chin, lifting his head to meet her gaze. Jayden knew that Grace wasn't used to seeing him defeated like this. Resolve settled over her demeanor, as though she was determined to put on a brave face for him, even though he could see that her heart was breaking just like his was.

"I hate this too. Of course, I do. The idea of being so far away from you is not something I want to think about, but I have to believe that this is the next step you're meant to take, and I am so proud of you. Not very many small-town kids from Iris Cove, Texas get a basketball scholarship to a fancy school like that... let alone a full ride!" Jayden let a little smirk slip at this comment. The scholarship was his greatest accomplishment. "God has blessed you with immeasurable talent. Don't ever take that for granted." He winced at this, thinking about all the hard work he had put into his athletic and academic career, all the long hours he had practiced and studied to get to where he is now. He hated letting someone else take the credit, but that was what Grace believed, and he didn't have the heart to argue about it now, not on their last night. With as much composure as he could muster, Jayden told Grace that she was right.

“I’m usually always right,” she said as she let a beaming smile form at her lips. Even with the gloom that surrounded this final night, her smile made him weak in the knees. Jayden realized that he had been following Grace ever since the first time he smiled at her. Their relationship hadn’t started until their sophomore year of high school, but that didn’t mean that she hadn’t taken a piece of his heart on that first day together when they were just twelve. Looking at her now, smiling up at him, he knew he had given her his whole heart, and she had given him hers. Tomorrow their lives would be uprooted from what they had known and been so comfortable with for so long, and that was what made him the most anxious about the next day’s arrival. He wasn’t ready for an entirely new world that he had no idea about, but ready or not, tomorrow always came. For tonight, at least they had each other and the wonderful memories they’d created. For now, that had to be enough.

Jayden matched her bright smile and placed a soft kiss on her lips; her lips responded to his slowly, assuredly. The kiss lasted longer than he had planned, yet he relished in every moment of it. When they broke apart, they smiled at each other again. It didn’t quite reach either of their eyes because they felt all the lasts that tonight would bring. Instead, Jayden squeezed Grace’s hand before turning and beginning their walk again in search of pizza.

The rest of their night had been filled with laughter. They went to all of their favorite places, starting with pizza and then making a stop at the bowling alley where they hung out with the friends that hadn’t yet left for school or were staying nearby. It was nice to catch up with others in his class who he hadn’t said goodbye to yet. Soon they stopped at their favorite ice cream shop and shared their usual: butter pecan for her and cookies and cream for him topped with a mountain of whipped cream and cherries. Finally, Grace made a stop at the fountain. She did this every time they were in the square. As she stood in front of the fountain, she closed her

eyes and began mouthing to herself. Jayden watched her closely. The worry that had previously been a veil over her face had been torn away. There was peace in her expression, and Jayden found himself envious of it. There was a storm raging in his heart as their night was coming to an end, and he wished for a sliver of that peace she had found. Before he knew it, she opened her eyes and threw her coin into the fountain before turning to him with her bright smile again.

“What’d you wish for?” Jayden asked in hopes of revealing how he could get a hold of some of that peace that now seemed to radiate her entire being.

“You know I don’t make a wish.” She playfully nudged his shoulder with a closed fist. “I said a prayer, and it’s between me and God now.” She let out a happy sigh, as if sharing that final part was the answer to everything, as if God held the answer to everything. It took all of Jayden’s restraint to keep from rolling his eyes. Instead, he lifted his hand and brushed a strand of hair away from her face. Despite her silly tradition, he always enjoyed seeing her happy.

Jayden grabbed her hand and turned in the direction of their neighborhood. They lived only a few streets apart, but this now signaled the final “last” of the night as he began to walk her home. She swayed their intertwined hands back and forth as she hummed the tune of one of her favorite worship songs. Every now and then, she would turn to Jayden and share something she was looking forward to about the coming weeks and starting school. Her mood was bright and uplifted. The gloom that had surrounded them at the beginning of the night had completely left her, but this only made it double within Jayden. He echoed her earlier statement in the depths of his heart: he didn’t want this night to end. As Grace went on talking or humming, Jayden wished for more time. Jayden wished for just one more day, even if it was this day replaying over and over again. He would do the whole *Groundhog’s Day* thing if it meant he didn’t have to leave Grace. It was impossible, he knew, but he wished it anyway.

Despite all his wishing, they arrived at her front porch. She had grown quiet now.

With another heavy sigh, she said, “I can't believe it's come so fast. Didn't we just walk the stage?” Grace looked down at her feet, and Jayden noticed the change in her mood.

Jayden put his hand under her chin, lifting her face to look at him. “Just like this summer flew by, so will our time apart. Before you know it, it'll be Christmas break and summer again.”

Grace perked up a little bit at this thought. “Then it'll be college graduation and a celebratory trip abroad!”

Jayden resumed their walk up the steps to her door as he continued. “I'll get down on one knee and propose in front of the Eiffel Tower.” He looked at her then and smiled. They'd talked about these plans countless times with the thought of their love being able to overcome any distance and obstacles life put in their way.

They stopped in front of the door, and she gazed dreamily up at him. “I'll say yes, of course. A thousand times yes, and we'll have the shortest engagement.”

“We might even elope.” He wriggled his eyebrows at her.

Grace's expression changed immediately as she spoke firmly. “No, we definitely won't.”

Jayden laughed but put his hands up in mock surrender. “Okay. Fine. We won't elope.” He paused. “We'll have a small church wedding, instead, with our closest relatives and friends.”

Grace looked up at night sky, before turning back and nervously asking, “And we'll live happily ever after?” Grace held her eye contact. Fear clouded her expression, which had been so confident and hopeful before.

Jayden brought his hand up to caress her cheek, and she leaned her face into the palm of his hand. Her eyes closed for a moment before looking at him once more. He tucked a strand of hair that had fallen into her face behind her ear and said, “Happily forever after.”

She smiled at him and moved to her tip toes, meeting his lips in a kiss. They looked at each other for a moment. As he studied her, there was clearly peace in her expression again, although there was still a hint of sadness in her eyes. This was their final goodbye. He and his parents would be leaving around five in the morning, well before she woke up. Before she could say anything, he reached out and wrapped her in his arms. He held on tight, he held on for dear life, because he didn't know how to do life without her. He took in the feel of her body in his, the scent of a spring meadow coming off her hair, the warmth of her hands on his back as she squeezed him tight. He turned his head so that his cheek rested on the top of her head and whispered the only thing that he could think to say to end this night. They had already said so many other things tonight. This was all that was needed.

“I love you, Gracie. Forever.”

She sighed at his words. “I love you, too, Jay.” He looked down at her then, and their lips met once more. This kiss was soft, sharing all the things each of them were feeling but didn't have the words to say. When their mouths broke apart, he gave her one last squeeze before taking a few steps away from her. They both smiled weakly at each other until she turned away to push open her front door. Jayden was already backing down the porch steps as he watched her walk inside. She turned to him one last time and gave a small wave from where she stood. He gave her a salute, bringing in a final silly gesture that represented all the laughter that made up most of their time together. Jayden's last glimpse of Grace was of her giggling quietly and shaking her head before closing the door.

It was then that Jayden turned to walk away, his feet feeling heavier and heavier with lead after every step he took.

Chapter 5

Jayden entered the dimly lit house. His parents had left the lamp on in the living room for him, but their home was dark and quiet otherwise, much like his mood. He knew leaving Grace was going to be hard, but he never imagined he'd feel such emptiness without her, and it had only been a few minutes. He locked the door behind him and used the little energy he had left to trudge up the stairs.

As Jayden made it to the landing of the second floor, he was surprised to see his sister Olivia's door open ahead. These days, she normally had it closed, so he thought of the invitation this might entail. His sister, his *twin* sister, had been avoiding him lately; however, she knew he was going out with Grace tonight and would be coming home late, so maybe she left her door open because she was ready to talk. He made his way over to her room to peak his head in. He could hear faint music as he approached the bedroom door. As he looked in, he gave a soft knock on the open door, signaling his arrival. He noticed faint music coming from headphones in Liv's ears; she couldn't hear him. He watched her for just a moment, head down, long hair pulled up into a messy bun, legs crossed, music playing, and mind focused on the page in her lap as she drew. One of his favorite things about Liv was her talent as an artist. Ever since she was little, she always loved drawing, and she was so good at it. Whether she was just sketching something on a napkin or painting on canvas, her skill was undeniable.

Now she had a scholarship of her own to Texas Christian University just a few hours away, but he'd be going to Los Angeles. Ever since he had announced this, she'd pushed him away. They'd never been so far from each other, and not being able to talk to her these last several weeks had taken a toll on him. She was his best friend, and while he didn't understand the distance she had placed between them, he wanted to bridge the gap. Maybe she did too.

He walked a few steps into the room and waved his hands gently near her line of sight. He didn't want to start off on the wrong foot by frightening her. She must have noticed his movements because she looked up. When she saw that it was Jayden in her doorway, her eyes glazed over with hardness before looking back down at what she had been working on. Jayden almost stepped back at the sudden cold that penetrated his soul when she'd looked at him. He couldn't remember the last time they had been this at odds, but she had never been like this, and he had no idea why. Despite the wall she had created between them, he was determined to break it all down.

"Hey, Liv," Jayden started as he waved again. She had yet to take out her headphones, so he had to get her attention again. He leaned down to put his face in her peripheral line of vision. After a few seconds, she paused from sketching, let out a heavy sigh, and finally looked up as she pulled out one earbud.

"What's up?" She spoke as if she had already run out of patience.

"Nothing. I just saw that your door was open and... What are you up to?" Jayden was fumbling now, hoping she would throw him some kind of bone at this point.

"I'm drawing." Her voice was dripping with annoyance as she gestured to the sketchpad in her lap and the pencils haphazardly thrown about her bed. She looked back down and began drawing again. The music still blared. He recognized the sound of her favorite band blaring through the earbud she'd tossed on the bed. Hopefully, they'd keep her mood pleasant... or at least keep her civil. Jayden took a tentative step forward.

"What's it a picture of?" He was extending the olive branch, hoping she'd take hold of it. He took a few more steps and craned his neck to see if he could get a glimpse of her picture, but

he suddenly flinched back at the sound of her sketchpad slamming shut. Olivia huffed before removing the other earbud and giving her full attention to her brother standing before her.

“It’s nothing important,” she spit out. “Is there something that you needed, Jay?” She crossed her arms defiantly, but relief filled his entire being when she said his familiar nickname. When Liv was mad at him, she always called him Jayden, but she hadn’t said that. Maybe that meant there was a chance at reconciliation. Maybe he would be able to find out why she was so mad at him, and they could get back to being the inseparable duo they had been when they were younger.

“I just wanted to check in with you. It feels like it’s been forever since we’ve really talked. I just want to know how you are. I’ve kind of been missing my best friend.” Jayden tried to give his sweetest, most innocent smile, but he was met by the sight of Olivia rolling her eyes at his last statement. He was surprised they didn’t get lost in the back of her head.

“Your best friend?” She almost choked on the words. “Isn’t that Cole? Or was it Grace?” Olivia put her finger to her chin, emulating actual thinking going on, but there was an edge of anger in her voice and a grimace on her face. Her walls were higher than he imagined, and a bit of fear crept back into his mind.

Jayden still moved forward, refusing to give up. He sat on the very edge of her bed. “Come on, Liv. Even when friends or relationships come into our lives, we’re wombmates, remember? Forever and always, no matter what.” Jayden smiled at her again and reached toward her to pinch her leg. Just like that, her hardened exterior cracked. A hint of a smile appeared as the left corner of her mouth slightly twitched and lifted.

“Wombmates?” She rolled her eyes again, but this time, it came with a smirk on her face. Olivia rubbed her forehead in embarrassment, letting out a frustrated groan. “Please tell me you did not just call us that?”

Jayden knew she was refusing to let her smile flourish into anything bigger, but she’d shown a weakness, and he was determined to break her shell wide open. Loudly, and in his dorkiest voice, he said, “You know I did, *wombmate!* And don’t you forget it.” Jayden winked at her and gave her leg a small shove which caused Olivia to let out the giggle she had been trying to hold in. “Ha! You laughed, Liv. You can’t be mad anymore. Those are the rules!”

“Those are *your* stupid rules, Jay, and I’ve always hated them.” She feigned anger, but Jayden could see right through her thanks to the smile that was still on her face.

“Like ‘em or not, those are the rules, so you can’t be mad at me anymore.” Jayden matched her smile with a beaming one of his own, and he knew he’d gotten through to her. Olivia rolled her eyes for the third time, shaking her head at his ridiculousness.

“Fine,” she conceded.

“You know, if you keep rolling your eyes like that, they’re going to get stuck in the back of your head.” Without fail, she rolled her eyes again as Jayden knew she would before sticking out her tongue at him.

Jayden chuckled loudly and sighed. The air felt breathable again, and he was no longer suffocated by the tension. As he looked at Liv who was still smiling although she had gone back to drawing, the weight of the last weeks lifted off his shoulders. He silently cursed himself for not taking the time to talk to her sooner. There had been so many things that had demanded his attention, so she had fallen to the bottom of that list. He could see why she had been avoiding him. He would have avoided himself too for being so self-absorbed lately. Laughing with Liv

had always been one of his favorite things to do, and he didn't realize how much he had missed it until now. He had always known how to make her laugh – with silly jokes or funny faces. No matter how hard Olivia tried to be mad at him, he was her Kryptonite. It had gotten harder as they grew older, but he knew her to her core, and he somehow could always get through to her. Even when it seemed like the divide between them couldn't possibly get any larger, he found a way to cross it and bring them closer every single time.

Olivia had opened up her sketchbook again to continue her drawing. Jayden watched her for a few minutes, and she peeked up at him a couple times. She squirmed under his gaze, fidgeting in her position on the bed. He smiled to himself. She'd always hated it when people stared at her, but when she was drawing, she still couldn't be pulled away to tell him to stop. Putting her out of her misery, he shifted closer to her, and his gaze dropped to the image she was sketching. His breath caught in his throat at her realism. The sketch was a black and white image of a little boy and girl. They seemed to be in a treehouse glancing up at the moon. Somehow, she even made the stars shine in the night sky on the page.

Jayden let out a low whistle. “Wow, Liv. No matter how many times I look at your work, I am always amazed. You are so talented.” Her cheeks colored a bit at this. She'd never been one to accept a compliment easily. Jayden continued to examine the sketch in front of him as he ran his finger along the side of the image, outlining what he saw. Familiarity struck him as he took in each detail of the sketch. The shape of the tree was one he knew well. The small house in the distance was one he hadn't seen in a long time but had been to a lot when he was younger. The boy and the girl... “Is this... us?”

“Yeah,” Liv sheepishly confirmed. “We spent so many nights in that treehouse in Georgia whenever we’d visit grandma’s family in the summer. You remember that? It’s been so long.”

“Of course, I remember. That was our favorite spot – a hangout just for the two of us to escape all those aunts trying to force feed us grits with every meal.” They both laughed at this. They had loved summers in Georgia, but they hated those grits.

“It should be a crime, really,” Olivia chimed in between laughs. “How anyone could think that was an acceptable meal for small children is beyond me. It was pure torture.” Her laughter intensified at the memory as did Jayden’s.

“Let me get this straight.” Jayden tried to keep a straight face, but he was losing the battle. “You’re saying our aunts are torturers and should be in prison now... is that right?” She was holding her stomach now as she laughed. No one understood her quite like Jayden did, and no one ever made her laugh like he could. He shushed her for fear of waking their parents at this late hour, but it only caused both of them to laugh even louder. The memories of how many times they ran off to get away from the pinched cheeks, slobbery kisses, and mountains of grits that always awaited them ran through their minds. That treehouse had been their safe place, and everything seemed so much simpler then.

Their laughter finally died down, and Olivia looked up at her brother. “I loved that treehouse. Not just because we could get away, but because those were some of my favorite times with you. There was nothing to worry about back then. There was no school, no insane hours of practice, no other friends or relationships to worry about. It was just us, you and me against the world.” A sad smile crossed her face and she looked away. A tear threatened to drop from her eye, but she was holding back. He moved his hand to cover hers, and he squeezed it.

Olivia let out a sigh and looked over at him once more. “I guess I’ve been missing my best friend too... especially the way we used to be.” That single tear that she’d been holding back finally made its escape and trailed down her cheek.

“Liv...” Jayden said as he reached with his other hand to wipe away the tear. In that instant, she flinched from his touch, and her expression hardened. The slight smile that had just been there was now gone. Before his eyes, he could see those walls rising again. Her brow furrowed, she snatched her hand out of his grasp, and she scooted further away from him, inviting distance to come between them again.

“Well, it’s been a long time since we’ve been that way, huh?” Her tone was laced with disgust and resentment as she looked at her sketch of the two of them. “I don’t even know these kids anymore. All those things we were able to escape in those summers away have caught up to us now.”

“Liv, don’t—” He was pleading now, feeling her loss all over again.

“Don’t what?” Her voice rose, filled to the brim with anger.

“Don’t push me away.” It was a gentle wish. He didn’t want to fight. He wanted to rewind and just go back. *Please. Just go back.*

“I’m pushing *you* away?” She laughed, but there was nothing joyous about the sound. “That’s great, Jayden.” He flinched at the icy cold emanating from her voice and filling the room. “You know, I can’t just pretend like nothing has happened. You can’t just come in here, crack a few jokes, share a few memories, and pretend like everything is okay when it’s not!” She was climbing. The rollercoaster of emotions was quickly moving up the incline on its way to plummeting to disastrous depths.

“But why not, Liv? Talk to me. What happened?” His sincerity only spurred her on, further and further up until she reached the top.

“What happened?” Her voice was a yell now. She reached the peak and was soaring down. How he wished it was a thrilling drop instead of a terrifying one. Her eyes turned stone cold as he watched so many emotions pass through them – rage, pain, sadness. “What happened is that you changed. I guess we both did. It was bound to happen. You’ve always *loved* being in the spotlight, and I never did. You have always flaunted your talents in everyone’s face, and it made you into this egotistical jerk, especially since the scholarship announcement. You became the star basketball player who saved the town from complete obscurity by bringing home the state championship in your senior year.” She mockingly spoke about his achievements as her voice rose with each word. She was the best at knowing exactly what to say to bruise his ego. “You’ve got your new best friend Cole and the rest of the team. You’ve got your perfect girlfriend and your perfect relationship. You have everything you need, and from one day to the next, I just faded into the background of your life. I dove into my art and music, and we’ve just grown apart.” Jayden was shaking his head, willing this to stop. How did they go from laughing to this? “I’ve become nothing more than ‘Jayden’s sister’ to anyone who cares, but trust me, there aren’t many, and that is fine by me. With college coming, I can be whoever I want to be now that I’ll be out of your shadow.” She said that last line with disgust, as if being associated with him had been the worst thing for her. “Don’t try to start caring now after all these months of caring about nothing but yourself and basketball. It’s a little late for that.”

“Liv, that’s not true. It’s not too late. We’ve both gotten busy, I know. I admit that I’ve let other things get in the way, but you’ve never stopped being my best friend – not for a

second.” *Take the olive branch, Liv. Please.* She let out a heavy sigh, defeated. The ride was finally over, but no one was getting off unscathed.

“Maybe I never stopped being your best friend, but you stopped being mine.” She let the olive branch burn. Her walls were now reinforced with steel; there was no getting back in. “It’s fine really.” She was conceding again, but Jayden didn’t feel like a winner this time. “Truth is, it’s better this way. You’re leaving for college tomorrow with Mom and Dad, and I’m out of here in a week. All the pathetic excuses I made for why we hardly hung out anymore will be null and void. You’ll be thousands of miles away. You can go on with your new life, and I’ll go on with mine.” She locked eyes with him then, refusing to back down from all she’d just said and taunting him to refute her claims, but he didn’t. Jayden met her eye contact with a sigh.

“It doesn’t have to be this way though.” He knew she wanted a fight, but he just wanted his sister. He would leave here mangled and torn if that’s what it took to get her back. “We still have some time before we go our separate ways.”

Another joyless laugh escaped from her lips. “Are you serious, Jayden? You. Leave. To. Morrow.” She spoke slowly and loudly like he needed help hearing it. “I just said that. There is no time.”

“But you could come with us!” He jumped at this offering before she barely finished her sentence. The idea just came to him, and he thought it was brilliant. Excitement coursed through him as the plan came together. “You said it yourself. You don’t have to leave for another week. We can hang out tonight, pig out on ice cream, and watch dumb prank videos like we used to. Then you can come with us tomorrow. We can do a family road trip, just like going to Georgia.” He had her attention now. She was opening up to the idea; he could feel it. She leaned slightly forward, and her forehead smoothed out. She was listening to him. She wanted this too. “It’ll be

great,” he continued. “We can stop at Buc-ees for all our favorite snacks and play our favorite car games while mom yells at us from the front seat to keep it down and stop making a mess.” Again, she gave in to a small smile, like *déjà vu*. He was getting through to her. “You can see my dorm and help me unpack. I’ll even let you check out my roommate if you want. I mean, he might be hot, but I’m drawing the line at checking him out.” He could make her laugh. He *would*. He was determined. “You can walk around campus with me and help me find the best hangouts and study spots, the best places to get food. Come check out the food with me. There is no way LA has as good Mexican food as we do here, but we can try to find something, at least. We can also find which spots to avoid at all costs.” The ball had left his hands as it had so many times before, and he knew it would be nothing but net. *Swish*. He had this in the bag. The victory was coming. “Come on, big sis. What do you say? Let’s do this one last thing together before the craziness of college takes over... for old time’s sake?”

Instantly, he knew those were the wrong words to say.

Her face fell, and her reaction to that final statement said it all. What he thought would be the cherry on top turned out to be a boulder that crushed the entire sundae. Whatever progress he had made immediately disappeared.

“What’s the point, Jayden? These ‘old times’ are in the past for a reason. We aren’t these two kids anymore.” She paused to look at her drawing again before looking up at him once more. “We aren’t carefree with nothing to worry about but each other, and I don’t want to pretend, even just for a few days, that we’re something we’re not. Living in the past only causes more pain, and I don’t want that. I want to move on from that.” She looked away then, and Jayden slumped, defeat filling his entire being. She wanted to move on. There was no getting past that. “Besides, I have stuff to do, too, you know? We can’t all just drop everything. I might have a

week until I leave, but I need to finish packing, make sure I have all that I need. I can't spend half my time with you to set up your college life when I have my own to prepare for. If I want to leave next week, I need to spend all the time I have on my own college plans. The world doesn't revolve around you." She was twisting the knife.

"I know that, Liv. I just--"

"Just nothing. Let it go, Jay. I'm done. There's nothing else to be said. We've been living our own separate lives for a while now. You'll go off and live your life in LA, and I'll live mine here. Things with us will go on like they always have, and it'll be just fine."

Jayden opened his mouth to speak, but Olivia had already grabbed her phone to turn up her music again. She had turned away from him and was fiddling with her sketchpad in her lap. He had lost her again, and there was no getting through to her. Not even one of his silly jokes could fix this. He moved his hand to her knee and gave it a squeeze. She tensed at his touch, but at least she didn't pull away. Jayden didn't know if he could've handled that. He got up from the bed and headed to the door.

As he approached the entryway, he looked back once more. "Bye, Liv." His voice was so small, but there was nothing else to say, nothing else she would hear. She nodded her head once in his direction before putting her earphones in; she was done with their conversation. He stood and watched her for a moment. In that time, she gazed at her sketch a little longer before tearing it out of her sketchbook, crumbling it up, and tossing it in the garbage. That ripped-out page was like a piece of his heart that she'd ripped out of him. His eyes glanced toward the trashcan, and thought he noticed another photo of them that had been thrown out. Sadness overtook Jayden's face, and Jayden turned and walked dejectedly down the hall.

I guess we really are done.

Chapter 6

Valerie Crane sat at the dining room table reading her Bible and praying. She'd been waiting up for Jayden to get home from his date with Grace. She could never sleep until both of her kids were home. She settled in to fall asleep when she'd heard him walking up the stairs, but when he stopped at Olivia's room instead, her sleeplessness had returned.

She had seen her children growing apart these last few years, but there had never been a bigger rift between them than there was now. Once she heard them start talking, she immediately got up and went to the kitchen to read and pray. The only thing that could heal these wounds that were pulling them apart was God. She'd been praying for them for the last fifteen minutes. Her heart soared when their hushed laughter reached her ears. They hadn't done that in such a long time. Soon, the laughter turned into yelling, and she only prayed harder. She wasn't quite sure what had caused her sweet children, who used to be inseparable, to fall away from each other, but she prayed for that obstacle to be removed and that they could find their way back to each other again.

She heard footsteps on the stairs, and soon Jayden rounded the corner into the kitchen, looking downcast. Her brows furrowed with worry as she studied him. He looked like he'd just been through the ringer. She had known this distance between him and his sister had been eating him up, but whatever had just happened had really done him in. He went straight to the fridge and grabbed the leftover cake before moving to grab a fork from the drawer. He slammed the cake on the counter and dug in. He ate a couple of forkfuls, one right after the other, before he took a break from eating, sighing heavily. When he turned in her direction, he jumped and let out a yell as he noticed that she was at the table. Valerie chuckled at his reaction.

He laughed sheepishly. “Uh... hey, Mom. I didn't see you there.” He laughed again. Valerie waved him over to sit with her, so he put the lid on the pint of ice cream, put it back in the freezer, and tossed the spoon in the sink. Then he took the seat across from her.

“Straight from the carton, huh? Rough night then?” she asked, smiling. Jayden only nodded – any sign of a smile wiped from his face. Her heart ached. “What's the matter, *mi amor*?” She reached for his hand and hoped he'd be honest with her.

“Oh, nothing much. Your daughter just hates me is all.” Jayden tried to laugh this off, but she knew he was really beaten up about this fight with his sister.

“I'm sure she doesn't hate you.”

Jayden scoffed. “Mom. Liv starts seething with rage the moment I walk into a room.” Valerie opened her mouth to retort, but Jayden pulled back and held up his hand, stopping her. “And don't you dare say she that doesn't. I know you've seen it. She can barely stand to be in the same room as me, and she barely talks to me. Right when I thought that I was finally making some ground with her, she just pulls the rug out from under me.” He looked down at the table and started picking at the skin around his fingernails. He'd been doing this since he was a kid, anytime he was anxious. “I mean... I knew she'd be upset, but I didn't imagine it being like this.” He looked up then, and heartbreak filled his expression, tears threatening to spill out. He looked down again and started picking at the wood of the table.

Valerie moved her chair closer to his. She put one arm around his shoulder and used her other hand to smack his and stop him from picking at her furniture. Jayden chuckled. It wasn't his full-spirited laughter which had become one of her favorite sounds in the world, but it was a start. “I'm sure she's just having a hard time with the idea of you not being around here anymore. She doesn't know how to handle it. Honestly, I don't think any of us do, *Mijo*. For the last 18

years, the three of us have all been together under the same roof, and everything's changing now. That can't be easy for either of you." She began rubbing his back. "It certainly isn't easy for me, and your sister is just not doing the best job at expressing her pain or how hard this is for her."

Jayden shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know if I believe that, Mom. Sometimes I think she can't wait for me to leave here. She's just so cold. I mean... you should have heard what she said up there... seen what she did."

"Well, I heard a little bit of it. I'm not saying it's okay, but you know that's just your sister. She's always pushed harder to keep herself from getting hurt. She thinks creating these walls will protect her from the pain of losing you. She might be pushing you away, but it's still *you*, Jayden. I'm not sure she's going to win this one."

A hint of a smile tugged at the corner of Jayden's mouth. "So, you're saying she loves me, then? Can't get rid of me, even if she tried, huh?" Jayden spoke playfully, conceit in his tone.

Valerie laughed. "Something like that, *Payaso*."

Jayden laughed too. "Thanks, Mom." He let out a contented sigh.

Valerie's laughter subsided, and she became serious. She knew she only had so much time left with him. Jayden looked over at her and seemed to notice the change in her demeanor.

"Okay. What's the matter, Mom?"

"I want you to know that Charlie and I support you 100% in anything you choose to do." Charlie, her husband of 8 years now, had been a Godsend who treated her and the kids with nothing but unconditional love. He had come into a broken home, and he'd thrived. It wasn't always easy, but Charlie found his way into all the broken pieces and put them back together. While they never had a child of their own, he had never seemed to mind. Jayden and Olivia *were*

his kids. He had always felt that way, and he made sure they'd known it too. "We have always supported your dreams."

"I know that, Mom."

"And I know that we've talked about this several times. Charlie even told me that he mentioned this to you earlier, but I just have to ask you again," Valerie paused and took a deep breath before going on. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"By *this*, do you mean go to school?" Jayden looked confused.

"I guess I mean go to *that* school. I have no doubt in my mind that you will succeed wherever you go, but this is a big change. It just kills me to see what this is doing to you and your sister. Gracie is staying close by and so is Cole. For purely selfish reasons on behalf of Charlie and I, I'd also love for you to be a few hours away instead of a few days away."

Jayden was laughing now. "Well, I definitely know that."

"I just want to be sure that *you're* sure. I don't want you to go because you think we're expecting this from you or because you're trying to prove anything. I want you to go for you." She reached for his hand and squeezed it. "As the days have gone by, I've seen you get more anxious and nervous. You've seemed a little quieter when Liv and Grace make plans to hang out in the fall for this or that and—" She paused, hesitating. She was afraid to say these next words, afraid to upset Jayden because she knew he didn't like talking about this, but she had to speak out about the worries in her heart. She credited her mother's intuition as to why she believed that Jayden might be going down that same dark path he did a few years earlier, pushing everyone away and pretending everything was okay until he could barely function on his own. It had been a stressful time for all of them, and her heart broke, not knowing how to help or comfort him. In those moments, she relied on God's strength to pull them all through, and He had. He led them to

the right doctor who did everything she could to find the right medication that would pull Jayden out of the darkness. Valerie didn't like the thought that Jayden might be feeling that way again, but she wanted to do whatever she could to support him through it. She just hoped he would let her in this time before it was too late.

Jayden was still quiet, waiting for her to go on, so she continued. "Sometimes, that brightness you exude is just a little dimmer these days." She met his eyes, frustration clear as day behind them. His body tensed up.

Jayden sighed. "Mom..."

"Now, just let me finish." She spoke firmly, and Jayden nodded. She had to get this out. "You and your sister mean the world to me. I want nothing more than for you to be happy. At the end of the day, just choose whatever is going to make you happy. Can you do that for me?"

Jayden nodded again. "Yeah. I can do that."

"After tonight, your life is never going to be the same. Something new will begin, but you get to decide what direction you want to go in... so what's it gonna be?" Valerie knew what answer she wanted to hear, but resolve appeared on Jayden's face. She knew his answer before he even said it.

"It's California, Mom." He pulled away from her embrace to turn and look at her. His eyes lacked their usual liveliness. "Yeah, I've been a little nervous, but as scary as it is and as much as I hate leaving Liv and Grace and Cole and you guys, I think I'd regret not making this move in the long run. I know everything is going to be different from here on out, but... I think I'm ready for this change." Jayden never broke eye contact. Valerie studied his face.

Determination filled his eyes as he answered, despite the fight he'd just had with his sister.

She sighed. “Well, I'm ready if you are.” She hugged him again, and they held onto each other for just a moment.

When she let go, Jayden stood from the table, making a move to leave. “California, here I come!” He whisper-shouted this sentiment, and a smile spread across his face. Still, it didn't reach his eyes.

He began heading out, but Valerie spoke out to stop him before he got too far. “Before you go, can I pray for you?” She watched him closely; His face hardened, just for a moment, and it broke her heart. What had happened to her God-fearing boy?

“I actually have a lot of packing to do, Mom. Later?” She knew that later might never come, but Valerie nodded as Jayden walked back over to kiss her on the top of the head before turning to leave.

Once he left the room, Valerie clasped her hands together and prayed for him anyway, hoping that this next journey for Jayden would be eye-opening for him and that the Lord would guide his path every step of the way.

Chapter 7

As Jayden made his way up the stairs to his room, he thought about the last image of his mom just now. He had turned to look back at her one more time, and she had clasped her hands together and bowed her head. Her mouth moved, quietly whispering a prayer.

Jayden shook his head at the thought. How could his mom waste her time with such ridiculousness? God wasn't listening to her. Jayden had learned that the hard way a long time ago. It was sad his mom still believed in all of that. Praying would do nothing for her, and he hoped she could realize that just like he did. They were on their own in this life.

Once Jayden made it back to his room, he walked back and forth, from his closet to his drawers to his duffle bag, packing last minute items in there since all the boxes had already been packed in the car earlier. As he looked around, he noticed the nick in the wall where he and his sister had played darts and missed. He smiled at the memory. Their dad – their *real* dad, Derek – had bought the dart board for one of his birthdays. His mom hadn't been very happy about it, but she'd let them keep it. He'd hung it up in his room, and he and Liv had spent hours in here, throwing around darts, honing in their skills. Liv had left the nick in the wall; her skills never really improved. He shook his head, missing all the time they had spent here together. They used to hang out all the time; every spare moment they had in the day had been spent with each other. How could they have let it get this bad? How could *he* have let it go this far?

He shook himself out of thinking about the divide between him and Liv by looking at one of the posters hanging on his wall. It was a photo of the San Antonio Spurs from their last championship in 2014. He loved the team, despite more recent setbacks, but he had placed that poster there intentionally. Behind this poster was a hole he had punched in the wall after a rough game in his junior year. He still wasn't sure whether his parents had discovered the hole yet.

He'd hated his performance in that game, and he knew he could have done so much better – he *should* have done so much better. Without thinking, his disappointment turned into rage, and he'd hit the wall and made the hole. He immediately got the poster to cover it up, but it served as a reminder that he needed to stay on top of his game, on top of his schoolwork, on top of everything. Thinking about it again now brought up all those old feelings of failure. He hated letting anyone down. He couldn't let that happen when he went off to college.

Jayden moved his gaze from the poster and walked toward his dresser. He picked up a framed photo of his family – Mom and Charlie, him and Liv. They were all smiling, arms around each other. He didn't think they had been like this in a long time. Things had been different since he had made his decision to leave. He knew his parents were having a rough time with his decision to move so far away, even though they tried to hide it. It had been hard to share his excitement with them. He knew they were happy for him, but they always talked about the possibility of him going to a school closer to home, just like his mom had done moments ago.

He couldn't stay here though. He couldn't stay close. They didn't understand why; he didn't quite understand it himself. However, ever since he made his decision, a distance was created between them that he had never experienced. Maybe it was all in his head. His parents were, after all, taking 20 hours to drive him to school and help him set everything up. Despite the chasm that was between them right now, he knew he'd always have their support, even Olivia's. He decided to place the picture in his backpack. He wanted it on the dresser in his dorm. He put it in his bag along with the last few items he had on his bed.

He looked around and pat his back pockets. *Money... where did I put that emergency stash?* He couldn't forget to pack that. Jayden placed his hands on his temples to concentrate. His head snapped up and he walked hurriedly to his desk. Jayden began rifling through the first

drawer. He had gone through them before looking for anything important he might have left behind, even though he knew his parents could just mail him anything he forgot. Somehow, he'd forgotten the most important thing. His money stash had to be in here.

He opened the second drawer and started digging around. He was getting worried he might not find it. *Could I have placed it somewhere else?* The second drawer turned up nothing. He was working on his last desk drawer when the leather-bound cover, hiding under a stack of papers, was suddenly under his fingers. He paused and his breath caught as his hands brushed over the familiar worn book he'd had for years. Jayden knew what it was before even pulling it out. He hadn't looked at this in over a year or two. He didn't remember seeing it the last time he went through his drawers, but maybe his mom had snuck it in at some point. Jayden grasped the book and pulled the Bible out of the drawer.

His eyes were immediately drawn to the gold embossed letters in the bottom right corner. *Jayden Walker*. His grandfather had had it engraved for his thirteenth birthday. He remembered walking through the store, picking out the book together, and deciding on what font and color they'd use for the engraving. They'd made a day of it. Jayden smiled. His grandpa had always taken him out for special days like that. He ran his fingers over his name, just like he had on the day he got it, just like he had so many times before. Then he read the title.

Holy Bible.

Jayden scoffed. What a joke. He used to take this Bible everywhere with him. He packed it in his backpack throughout the rest of eighth grade. He had it with him when he started a Bible study with his classmates in his freshman year of high school. He had it in his gym bag for every away game he went to once he made it on varsity in his sophomore year. He'd read it every

morning, before every game, and sometimes during any free time throughout the day. It was his most prized possession from the moment he got it.

He opened the worn cover, knowing what he'd see inside. Jayden's eyes began to water, gazing upon the familiar dedication on the first page. He had read it so many times by this point that he had it memorized. In his grandfather's scrawly handwriting, he wrote:

To my Jay Man,

You are one of a kind. You are a ray of light. The plans God has in store for you are good and greater than you could ever imagine. Jeremiah 29:11. Don't ever forget that promise, and don't ever let your light for Christ and love of life go out. That would be a shame. I love you.

- Granddad

A single tear slid down his cheek. He hadn't read those words in a long time. He stared at them a few moments longer before slamming the cover shut. Yes, that book had been his most prized possession since the moment he got it... until the moment he lost his grandpa.

He had tears in his eyes for the grandpa that he missed and the sadness in knowing that the words he wrote to him all those years ago were never true. How could a God who calls His plans "good" allow his grandpa, one of Christ's most faithful servants, to die from negligence? His grandfather spent his entire adult life as a pastor of a church and lived out all of his days serving Him just to die from something that could have been prevented.

The truth of the matter is that Jayden was going to UCLA to pursue a degree in the medical field for his family and their own well-being. When he got a full scholarship to UCLA for basketball, he knew he had to take it because they also had a great medical school program

that he was really interested in. As an African American from a low-income family, he knew the percentage of Black male doctors in the industry was incredibly low. He'd done so much research since his grandpa had passed. He, along with so many others like his own grandpa, yearned for more representation in the medical community. He hoped that he would be able to help some patients feel more comfortable because they had a doctor that they could relate to.

Jayden recalled all the times his grandfather told him how uncomfortable he felt going to the doctor's office. Growing up being mistreated and tossed aside had made his grandpa wary of others, so he avoided doctors most of his life, and in the end, it had cost him his life. If he'd been more comfortable going in and seeing the doctor more regularly, they could have helped him manage his high blood pressure, and it wouldn't have caused the stroke that ended his life. It was all preventable, and yet his grandfather still died. One day he was here and going to Jayden's home game, and the next morning he was gone. God took one of the best men he had ever known away from him. Because of that, he couldn't bear to see those words, read into the lies, or hear anyone speak about this God who "cared for us" but didn't really show it.

Jayden shook his head in disappointment at his once treasured possession. *I can't believe I fell for that nonsense for so many years.* He was an adult now. He was too old to believe in fairy tales anymore. His jaw tensed up, and he threw the Bible all the way to the back of the drawer before slamming it shut.

Jayden shook his head and scoffed. He eventually ended up finding his emergency money in the back of his sock drawer. He packed a couple more things, looked around and deemed his room well-sorted, and then made his way to his bed. He needed to get some sleep. He had barely made it through this day, and tomorrow was going to be another long day he'd have to survive. He turned off his bedside lamp, plunging himself and his mind into the darkness.

Chapter 8

The blaring of his alarm at five in the morning came before he was ready for it. It didn't help that he only had about three hours of sleep. With a grunt, he rolled out of bed. Jayden grabbed his backpack from where he left it at the side of his bed and made his way to the door. He could already hear his parents' hushed voices in the kitchen, a coffee maker gurgling out the black energy he knew Charlie would need to make the drive. As he stepped through the threshold of his open door before exiting his room, he turned and took one final glance around, his room barely lit by the moonlight still coming through the window. In the final look around his bedroom, he realized there was nothing left here for him. His eyes landed on the desk drawer that his Bible had been thrown in, solidifying his thoughts; pain and bitterness covered his face. Without hesitation, he reached for the handle and closed the door, leaving his childhood in the dark. California was bound to have bigger and better things for him. He smiled at this thought as he bounded down the stairs toward his parents.

They got on the road about half an hour after his alarm went off, and the drive was just as he imagined it would be. Jayden looked to the empty passenger seat beside him, wishing that Olivia had taken him up on his offer and was sitting beside him, but that thought fled quickly. He did his best to push aside the hurt and focus on the sights passing him by. Slowly, the familiarity of his hometown was left behind. Soon Texas was also left and there was nothing else to look forward to other than California.

Charlie sang too loudly and off-key, but it made Jayden smile. He was going to miss the terrible singing voice he had been putting up with for years. Charlie was also determined to stop at a few places along the way. Charlie had the most adventurous spirit, and he had been determined to share it with Jayden and Olivia since he came into their lives, so Jayden wasn't

surprised when Charlie came to him a few weeks ago with a road trip plan including a couple circled pit stops. They wouldn't stay in each place long, as they still had a timetable to keep, but Charlie wanted to show Jayden some adventure on their drive as a last hurrah before college.

Their first stop was at White Sands National Park in Alamogordo, New Mexico. They made it to the park just before four in the afternoon. Charlie had arranged for them to take a scenic drive through the dunes in the park. When Jayden saw the white sands blanketing the entire surrounding area, he was speechless. He'd never seen anything like it; he imagined this is what a snow-covered landscape looked like in the winter. Being from South Texas that was known for its less than chilly winters, he didn't have much experience with snow. The white sands he looked at now were as close as he'd ever gotten, without the icy weather, of course.

As they drove through the area, his mom gasped from the front seat at the sight. She, too, had always lived in South Texas. He remembered her talking about a few random days of snow when she was in her early twenties. She played in the snow with her sister and their dad, but their little town hadn't had a day like that since. Unlike Charlie, who grew up in the north and had more traditional winters, Jayden and his mom were used to dead grass lands for winter accompanied by chilly weather. The sight of the sands, seeing nothing but white for miles, was breathtaking, and no part of it got old or boring during their hour-long drive through the dunes.

When they were done at the park, they picked up dinner to eat on the road, and Jayden took the spot behind the driver's seat. They were on their way to Tucson, Arizona, their pit stop for the night. They made it to the hotel just before eleven, and after checking in, they rode the elevator up to their room. As Jayden crawled between the sheets, he savored the cool feeling of the satin against his skin. After spending an afternoon in a hot desert, he'd been warm the entire ride over, so the chill was welcomed. His mind soon drifted off as his eyes closed to sleep.

They got to sleep in a little bit before making their first stop at another national park after having breakfast in the city of Tucson. This next stop was for his mom: Saguaro National Park. His mom loved those plants and had heard about how massive those cactuses could get. Charlie planted some other cactus in the front yard for her, since Texas doesn't have any saguaros, so when Charlie showed this location to Jayden on his road trip map, he knew that his mom was going to love it.

Their time in Saguaro National Park was spent on a little hike. His mom smiled from ear to ear as they walked through the rocky terrain and saw cacti of all shapes and sizes. His mom stood next to one saguaro for a picture, and it towered over her. It wasn't very hard for her five-foot-two height, but she was still mesmerized by it. Jayden took photos with his mom next to the same plant, and it was even taller than him. After Charlie snapped their photo, she turned to him with bright eyes, her face damp from the exercise and the heat of the day. The smile she had on her face said everything that Jayden was feeling. She reached out and gave his hand a squeeze before turning to walk with Charlie down the path again.

He watched his parents then, hand-in-hand, as they made their way down the trail. For the first half of his life, he didn't remember having a functional family. He lived with his grandparents in a small room that he shared with his mom and sister. His mom worked a lot, and it was his grandparents who picked him up from school, helped him do his homework, made him dinner. His mom worked late sometimes, and he knew, even then, that she was doing all she could to provide for their family. His dad, Derek, was around when he felt like it, which wasn't often. They waited by the window looking for his truck too many Fridays that just ended in disappointment. If you had told Jayden then what his life would look like now, he would have

never believed it. The picture of Charlie walking with his mom brought back all the feelings of gratitude for a relationship that he took for granted when it first started.

The truth is, Charlie changed everything for them. When Charlie came into their lives, his mom didn't have to work as much. She could stay at home, get them from school, watch cartoons with them, and help with homework. Charlie helped them get a regular house where he didn't have to share a room with anyone anymore. His dad even started to come around more because he didn't want to be left behind since a new guy had come into the picture. His dad would never admit that, but Jayden knew that was the only reason he and Olivia didn't have as many disappointing Fridays waiting by the window. Not only that, but Charlie even encouraged it. He made it a point to be friends with their dad and create one big happy family, as ridiculous as that sounds, and it worked. Jayden's life had never been better.

Even though Jayden and Olivia gave Charlie a hard time when he first came around, Jayden knew that someone like Charlie came once in a lifetime. As he watched his mom look up at Charlie with nothing but pure joy in her eyes because of a few tall cacti, Jayden smiled. Charlie would do anything for his mom, for them, even if it was something as silly as a little hike among the saguaros. Charlie had been making her dreams come true for the last ten years, and Jayden knew she was in good hands, and he was grateful for that.

They all had been in Charlie's good hands, and Jayden was about to leave them. No longer would Charlie be just a short drive away if he needed help. With the time difference, Charlie might even be hard to catch at a good time on the phone if their schedules didn't line up. The same went for his mom. Even though she was still a stay-at-home mom, she did a lot of volunteering with the church on most days since he and Olivia had become self-sufficient and needed her attention less. When they were all in the same town, he knew his parents would be

there to help him as quickly as possible, no matter what the situation may be. They both had become Jayden's most constant lifeline, and the thought of that being thousands of miles away gripped Jayden's heart like a boa constrictor. He couldn't breathe. The heat around him became stifling. He bent over and tried to calm his racing heart, his racing mind. Charlie must have heard Jayden's sharp intake of breath because he was right by his side in a heartbeat, as was Valerie. Charlie rubbed his hands up and down Jayden's back, speaking soothingly as he did. Valerie grabbed Jayden's hand and squeezed it like she did moments earlier.

"It's okay, Son. Just breathe. Close your eyes and breathe." There was no frustration. There was no annoyance. Charlie spoke with patience and understanding. The calmness that always surrounded Charlie almost brought Jayden to tears, but he was determined to hold them in. Crying in front of Charlie was not an option.

The panic attacks had started after his grandpa died, and he could count on one hand how many times he'd had them. After he started his medications, they stopped altogether. While they had recently started up again, he'd been able to keep it to himself. He never wanted his parents to see him like this. He tried to clear his mind of these frustrations, knowing that they only made things worse. He focused on Charlie's voice, his reassurances. He focused on his breathing, in and out, in and out. Both of his parents stood at his side, rubbing his back, as his heart rate returned to normal. His breaths came easier. Soon, he stood straight.

"Are you okay, *Mijo*?" His mom asked. "What happened?"

"I'm not really sure." Jayden lied. He didn't want to let them know his panic attack was brought on by the thought of being without his mom and dad. It didn't get more pathetic than that. He also didn't want them to start asking questions about how he was doing or about his medications which he wasn't taking regularly anymore. He'd been feeling really good for so

long. His depression had been brought on by trauma, but that trauma was long over. He didn't see the point in filling his body with medicines that he didn't need anymore, and this panic attack was just out of the blue. It hadn't even lasted that long, so he wasn't worried about it. He didn't want his parents to worry about it either.

"You haven't had a panic attack for quite some time," Charlie said. He seemed wary.

"Yeah," Jayden laughed. "That was weird. Maybe it's just a bit of nerves mixed with the altitude or something. It's already hard to breathe here." He laughed again, making it seem like this was no big deal. Charlie still eyed him suspiciously, but Jayden plastered on his best smile.

"You'd tell us if it was something else." Charlie said this as a statement, but there was a question in his eyes. Charlie always could see right through him, but Jayden wasn't saying anything to make his parents more worried about him than they already were.

"Yeah. Of course. And it was nothing." Jayden pat Charlie on the back reassuringly. "I'm fine." Jayden smiled again and began walking. "Come on, guys. We're almost to the end of the trail." He looked back and laughed. "I'm sure Mom has some more saguaros to take pictures of." He smiled at his parents. Boy, he was really laying it on thick.

His parents exchanged a questioning look before continuing their walk together, hand in hand. Despite the wariness Jayden knew was still there, they also smiled at him as they continued on. Before long, his mom had her phone out of his pocket, just as he predicted, taking pictures of yet another cactus.

They made it to Los Angeles around eight o'clock at night. They stopped for a late dinner before checking in to another hotel for the night. The morning would bring Jayden's move-in day, and he was still exhausted from his panic attack earlier. He hoped to be able to sleep easily as he crawled into bed on that second night, but restlessness is all that followed.

Chapter 9

The next morning, they stopped for breakfast and explored Los Angeles for an hour or so. Jayden was sad to know this adventure with his parents had come to an end, and he held on to every last moment with ferocity.

They finally made it to campus around eleven in the morning, and the campus was already busy with life. Jayden looked around to see other students doing the same thing he was going to be doing today: moving in. Some were on their own, greeting old friends that they hadn't seen since the spring semester ended. There were joyous reunions and a comfortability among them that made Jayden sure they were upperclassmen.

Other students looked around as he did with adults close behind them. He figured they were in the same shoes as he was: freshmen wondering how they'd fit in in such a big place. Jayden had visited the campus before, but it had seemed much quieter since classes were in session. As Jayden took in his surroundings and the bustling campus, he was certain that the entire campus was the size of his little town and filled with two or three times as many people. *Where am I going to fit in?* His chest tightened.

Then, a calming hand came down on his shoulder.

Jayden looked to his left and saw Charlie looking over at him, with a knowing smile on his face. Charlie squeezed his shoulder reassuringly.

"You're ready for this, Jay Man. It may seem daunting right now, but if there is anyone in the world who is ready to take on their freshman year like a champ, it's you."

Jayden smiled back at Charlie, the tightness leaving his chest just as quickly as it came. The realization of this both relieved and frightened Jayden. What would he do when Charlie

wasn't here to calm his nerves? As much as that thought scared him, he didn't have the time to linger on it right now. He'd just have to cross that bridge when he came to it.

"Let's go get you that dorm room, bud" Charlie said. He began walking to a registration table that was just off to their right. Valerie came up behind Jayden and nudged him before walking ahead of him, following Charlie. She turned around briefly to wink and give Jayden a thumbs up. Her smile reached her eyes, the crinkles in the corners becoming more pronounced the wider her smile became. She was beaming with pride, and it made Jayden feel proud too. He laughed to himself and began walking in the same direction his parents had just gone.

His dorm room was bigger than he thought it would be. Sure, it was still a hole, but it was a decent-sized hole. Already, he could see himself studying in here and not feeling cramped even though he would also be sharing the space with a roommate he still hadn't met. Jayden was currently setting up his desk while his mother was unpacking his suitcase and some other boxes, putting clothes away for him in his closet and drawers. Charlie entered the room then, carrying a large box in his arms.

"I think that's the last of them." Charlie huffed. "Finally. And I thought Liv was the over-packer. I think you might be worse than her, Jay." Charlie laughed, and Jayden and Valerie joined in.

"I guess it's a good thing most of the boxes were brought in by the student movers then, huh?" Valerie chimed in, winking at her husband. After setting the box down next to the others on the floor they had yet to go through, Charlie walked over to her.

"Hey, hey now. I brought in a lot of them, too!"

“Sure, you did.” She laughed and went back to putting away the clothes. Charlie shook his head and made his way over to Jayden, patting him on the back. “You ready for all this, bud?”

Jayden sighed. “I think so, Dad.” Nervousness tinged his voice. It was getting harder to hide how anxious he had been feeling these last few days and the thought of being on his own soon was overwhelming at times.

“Well, don't sound too excited.” Charlie smiled at him and poked him in the ribs, bringing out the laughter Jayden knew he'd been looking for from him.

“I am excited. I am. Just nervous.” Jayden's smile faltered a little, but he plastered it back on perfectly before his parents could notice. “I mean, I don't want to throw you off from this manly tough exterior you see in front of you, but I'm going to miss you guys being so close.” Jayden breathed out a nervous laugh.

“Did you hear that, Val?” Charlie whispered to his wife. “He actually said he's going to miss us.” Charlie's eyes went wide as he laughed heartily, and Jayden playfully shoved him.

“Yeah, yeah. Don't let that get to your head.” Jayden was laughing again now, his smile reaching his eyes. “But if you tell anyone I said that, I'll deny it.” Jayden looked over at his mom then and saw her smiling at her boys fondly before going back to adding some clothes to his closet. Charlie rolled his eyes as he made his way over to Jayden again. He placed a hand on each of Jayden's shoulders, looking him in the eyes.

“I'm going to miss you too, Jay. More than you can imagine.” Charlie looked at Jayden with fondness, and tears pricked the corners of Jayden's eyes. Their time together was almost up. Charlie pulled him in for a hug, and the two embraced for a while. Jayden wanted to hold on for dear life, but he reluctantly pulled back as Charlie loosened their connection. The tears were

more pronounced now, threatening to spill onto his cheeks. Realizing he was on the brink of breaking down and crying, Jayden took a deep breath and forced the emotion back. He pushed Charlie away again.

“Man, get out of here.” Jayden laughed. “I’ve got a reputation to protect, and first impressions are important. I can’t be known from the first day as the guy who cried because his mommy and daddy left.” Jayden went back to straightening up his desk, and Charlie laughed.

“Alright, alright. No more crying, then,” Charlie said. He moved to begin unpacking a box on the ground when a voice sounded from the door.

“Who’s crying?”

Both Charlie and Jayden turned to look at a young man in the doorway. He had the hint of a smile on his face, his floppy brown hair falling into his eyes. He must have been as tall as Jayden, and Jayden immediately stood taller and tried to puff out his chest. He didn’t know who this guy was, but he couldn’t be caught crying right now. Jayden turned to face away from Brian and wiped underneath his eyes, one last time, making sure any remnants of his sadness were completely gone, before turning back.

“No one’s crying,” Jayden said forcefully. The smile on this guy’s face only grew bigger.

“Are you sure about that?” His voice became playful as he moved his index finger and thumb to his chin, as if he were thinking. “Cause it doesn’t look that way to me.” His smile moved from ear to ear, and Jayden became agitated. Whoever this guy was, he had no right to come in here and start making fun of him. Jayden wasn’t sure that’s what he was doing, but he knew he didn’t like the smirk settling onto this stranger’s face.

“Who are you anyway?” Jayden said. Charlie turned in Jayden’s direction, probably surprised by the sudden hostility in his voice. The boy in the doorway just laughed, so Jayden spoke again. “Can we help you with something?”

The boy’s eyes lit up with that statement. “Actually, if you or your folks want to help me unpack, that’d be great with me. Heck, I might even cry when they have to go after spending a few hours with them.”

“Dude, what are you talking about?” Jayden’s frustrations were subsiding, confusion taking their place. The guy laughed again, stepping forward and extending his hand.

“I’m Brian, your roommate.” He paused and looked around. “Or did you think you had this tiny square of space all to yourself?” Brian was still smiling.

“Actually yeah, I did... for the next few hours at least,” Jayden responded, leaving his hands at his side. Brian put his hands over his heart, grimacing and pretending to be in pain, although the smile was back in place soon enough.

“Yikes. That one hurt man.” Brian then crossed his arms over his chest, leveling his stare with Jayden’s. “Now, are you always this cheerful, or should I expect another version of yourself to appear at some point?” The left side of his mouth hitched up in a smirk, and the tension that had been in the room dissipated with Jayden’s laughter. He shook his head.

“I’m sorry, man,” Jayden said. “You just caught me off guard. I’m Jayden.” He extended his hand, and Brian dapped him up.

“Nice to meet you, Man.” Brian then looked back and forth between Jayden and his parents. Jayden was quick to make introductions, and after shaking hands with them, the ear-to-ear smile returned to Brian’s face. “I was serious about that help with unpacking, though.” Everyone laughed and Charlie moved forward, patting Brian on the back.

“Alright, well, I guess I can help unload some more boxes.” Charlie looked back, rolling his eyes and feigning annoyance. Jayden thought back to moments earlier when Charlie thought he had just unloaded the last box. Jayden returned Charlie’s glance by shrugging his shoulders and laughing. Charlie turned to Brian again, extending his hand toward the open door. “Lead the way, my man.” They both exited the room.

Jayden looked at the now empty doorway, thinking back on the last few minutes. Despite a weirdly rough start, Brian seemed like a cool guy. The smile that came to Jayden then was genuine. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to get out of the funk he had been in since their time at the Saguaro National Park yesterday, but his spirits perked up with this exchange.

He liked his roommate. Brian came in here already feeling comfortable enough to bust his chops and lean on his parents for help. Somehow, Brian made it seem like they were old friends already, just catching up after not seeing each other for a long time. The thought that he’d already made a friend in just a few short minutes put him at ease, and he hoped the rest of his friendships came just as easily. He still had some reservations about the basketball team. Playing with guys on the court was nothing like making a friend in class, especially when winning games was on the line, but he was hopeful that they’d get along as easily as he and Brian just had.

I think I can do this.

Chapter 10

Charlie ended up complaining about lugging in just as many boxes for Brian as he did for Jayden even though the student movers also brought in most of Brian's things as well. Even so, by the end of it, Charlie was feigning back problems and refused to lift another finger until he laid down for an hour nap. Valerie insisted that she keep unpacking while the boys explored the campus a little bit. In all their back-and-forth trips, Jayden had found out that Brian was also a freshman on the team. He had been picked by a recruiter at the end of his basketball season a few months ago. Jayden knew his mother wanted him and Brian to have more time to get to know each other today. He figured her suggestion for them to explore the campus together was her way of making sure that happened.

After making plans to meet up around dinner time before his parents made the long drive back home, the boys set off to explore the place that would be their new home for the next few months.

As Jayden and Brian walked around campus that afternoon, a calm ran through him. The hectic morning bustle had died down, and while there were still a lot of people roaming about the campus, it felt right. He knew he belonged here. He had been so afraid this morning, wondering how he was going to fit in on such a big campus, but that feeling was gone now. He wasn't sure how or why that happened, but he was glad to be rid of it.

The two guys had found their rhythm with each other easily, laughing with each other and joking around like they'd been friends forever. Jayden usually clicked well with people. He wasn't sure why he had been so worried. As easily as his friendship came with Brian, Jayden was sure any other friendships would come the same way. When classes started in a few days,

Jayden would be right at home and back to his old self. The nervous wreck he had been the last two days was slowly becoming a figment of his imagination.

Soon, the boys came across one of the outdoor basketball courts. They saw some guys already shooting around, looking as though they were getting ready to start a pick-up game.

“Hey, man. Let’s play!” Brian said. “Practice starts soon, and we don't want to look like chumps out there on the court in front of Coach.” Brian nods his head in the direction of the court and begins walking that way. Jayden follows him.

“Yeah. A quick game would be cool.” Once Jayden and Brian made their way onto the court, they began talking to the others already out there playing. Soon, they shot for teams, and somehow Jayden and Brian ended up on the same one. Jayden was happy about this, looking forward to how the two of them would play off each other on the court. He’d played so many pick-up games on the court back home, but they’d hardly even been with strangers. He grew up with the guys that he normally played with, occasionally adding in a relative of one of them here and there when the holidays came around. He’d have to find his rhythm on a team again, so he was happy to have a chance to see if he could pick up a rhythm with Brian.

One the game began, the music he always heard when he played on the court emerged. He loved competing and the adrenaline he got from a game against an opposing team, but nothing beat the feeling of playing just to play. He loved this game. In his life, it had always brought people together, like it was doing now. It was in moments like these, as Jayden called plays to Brian and the other guys he’d just met, when he was grateful he’d found the game at such a young age. It had helped him come out of his shell, make friends, and share a bond that others could never really understand unless they also played the game like Jayden did,

unselfishly. Jayden took his fair share of shots, but he loved the magic in working together, leaning on each other, to run through the perfect play, take the perfect shot, make a perfect assist.

Jayden was relaxed on the court now, as was Brian, and they ran up and down the court, showing off their skills. Jayden watched Brian as he moved on the court. He was an amazing athlete. As he made his way up the court, the ball moved seamlessly with each step, as if it were an extension of his own body. Brian approached the top of the key, took a step fake toward the right, fooling his opponent, before crossing over to the left. He then started to set up his shot with a pump fake, but he glanced over and saw that Jayden was unguarded near the corner baseline. Quickly, Brian passed the ball to Jayden and ran down the middle. Jayden, seeing an opportunity, tossed the ball up from where he was for an alley-oop. Brian easily made the connection, like Jayden hoped he would, and slammed the ball into the hoop, a chorus of “oooohs” coming from those around them. Jayden and Brian high-fived and zoned in on playing defense now. Jayden couldn’t believe how well he and Brian were finding a rhythm together, and he soon track of time as he usually did when he was on the court.

The boys made it back to their dorm a few hours later. Charlie was up now, helping Valerie with some final things. They both turned toward the door as they heard the boys’ laughter.

“What have you guys been up to for so long?” Charlie asked. “I didn’t expect to be unpacking this room all by myself, you know?” Jayden knew Charlie was playing, but guilt consumed him. He shouldn’t have stayed out as long as he did.

“By yourself?” Valerie chimed in. “And what have I been doing this whole time?” She placed one hand on her hip and raised one eyebrow at Charlie. Jayden and Brian looked at each

other and smirked before looking down. Charlie had dug his own grave. The boys were staying out of it.

“You know what I mean, my love.” Charlie walked over to her and wrapped his arms around her waist. “You and I are one. When I say by myself, I mean us. You and I are always a package deal in my head.” His dad gave his mom a sultry smirk before winking, bringing her in for a kiss.

“Oh, gross. Come on, guys!” Jayden groaned. “This is *my* room! None of that here. And poor Brian is going to have to stab his eyes out now. I might even join him.” Brian was laughing by Jayden’s side, still avoiding looking in the direction of Jayden’s parents.

Charlie turned back around, with a mischievous smile on his face, as he addressed the boys.

“Fine, I guess it’s time we get out of here to get our own room then.” He looked back and winked at Valerie once more.

“Wow” Jayden deadpanned as Valerie yelled, “Charlie!” and smacked him on the arm. Charlie moved away, laughing and rubbing his arm.

“What?” he asked innocently. “Jayden was the one who suggested it.” His laughter still rang out in the room.

“You know what I meant, Charlie.” Jayden said, annoyed. “I think I’ll go vomit now. Thanks.” Jayden turned away from his parents and looked at Brian. “Sorry that my parents are disgusting, man. I didn’t mean to subject you to this.”

“Nah, it’s cool. I don’t mind.” Brian was still laughing, looking sheepish. “Not like this whole exchange isn’t weird and all, but it’s a nice change from what I’m used to at home.” Brian looked down then before returning his gaze to Jayden. He spoke quietly. “You’re pretty lucky,

man. At least your parents actually love each other.” Brian let out a chuckle, but it was anything but happy. An awkward silence filled the room for a moment. Jayden didn’t know how to respond to what his friend had just shared. Jayden could talk about his less than perfect relationship with his real dad, but he didn’t want to add to the “misery loves company” stereotype. Jayden was grateful when Charlie started to speak up.

“Don’t I owe you guys some dinner?” Charlie’s look was still mischievous, and Jayden was wary of him. “Let’s go get something to eat before your mom and I head to the hotel for some dessert.” Charlie wrapped his arms around his wife’s waist again from behind before planting a big kiss on her cheek.

“Ugh, Charlie. Come, on!” Jayden cried out, and Brian was laughing again. Charlie pulled away, laughing as well, and Jayden was happy to feel the tension in the room ease from what it had been.

“Seriously, though. I’m starving.” Charlie said. “We’ve been waiting for you guys for hours!” Charlie held his stomach, wincing in pain. Sometimes Jayden wondered who the adult in their family was because Charlie sure knew how to still act like a whiny toddler. Jayden laughed.

“Sorry, Dad. We got caught up in a pick-up game... or four.” Jayden looked guiltily at his parents. “We didn’t mean to be out for so long. Let’s get out of here.”

They all headed to the door, Jayden locking up behind them. Charlie took them out for one last dinner where they enjoyed more laughs, Brian fitting right into their family dynamic like he had always been part of it. It was a great way to spend their last few hours together.

They said their goodbyes when his parents dropped him off later. It was dark now, just after eight, and Brian quickly gave hugs before heading off in the direction of their dorm, giving Jayden some time alone with his parents. His mom reached out to give Jayden a warm embrace.

She held on longer than normal, as Jayden knew she would. She had tears in her eyes when she pulled back from him.

“We’re just a phone call away. Call us anytime you need anything. We’ll always be here.” She leaned up to give him a kiss on the cheek, and Jayden bent down to help her reach him before planting a kiss on her cheek as well.

“Love you, Mom.” Jayden smiled, his throat tightening at this final goodbye.

“I love you, too, *mi vida*.” She smiled at Jayden as Charlie pat him on the back one last time. Jayden looked between both his parents then. This was it. They were about to leave, and he’d be on his own, really on his own, for the first time in 18 years. The thought was overwhelming.

“You’re gonna do great, Son,” Charlie reassured him, as if he could read Jayden’s thoughts. Just believe in yourself as much as your mom and I believe in you, and you’ll be golden. God is going to use you in wonderful ways. I can’t wait to see it.”

Charlie placed his hand on the side of Jayden’s neck, and Jayden tried not to pull away. He loved his parents, and they’d had a great last few days, but he hated it when they brought God into things. Just when things had been so perfect, Charlie had to end it on this note. Jayden pushed away his new frustrations and focused on Charlie.

“I love you, Jay Man.” Charlie teared up now, too, and pulled Jayden in for a hug, and any frustrations Jayden felt were gone. This was his dad, and despite their differing beliefs, he didn’t want him to go.

“Love you too, Dad.” They held on for a moment longer before Charlie pulled away.

“We better get out of here before all of us start crying and you’re forever known as the guy who cried because his mommy and daddy left.” Just like that, they were all laughing again.

Soon, Charlie and Valerie made their way to the car, hand in hand. Jayden waved as he watched Charlie back out of his parking space and drive out of the parking lot. His mother turned to look out the window one more time, blowing him a kiss. He caught it and placed it on his heart before blowing one back to her, seeing her smile as she caught her own. She faced the front now, and Jayden watched their headlights pull onto the main road that headed out of campus. They'd be going to their hotel for the night before they'd take off in the morning and head back home. Soon their lights were out of sight and his parents were finally gone; Jayden still stood on the sidewalk looking in the direction they had gone, his feet planted in place. He breathed in and breathed out.

Jayden was now left on his own in the darkness.

Chapter 11

The early morning sunshine warmed Jayden's face. This heat was different from Texas, but Los Angeles had a breeze he'd come to love in the last few days since he'd been here. He would be melting, and his shirt would be soaked on a walk from his dorm to his first class had he still been in Texas. Jayden didn't know why he had been worried about the weather being different here in LA. It was much better here, and he could get used to this.

Now, it was his first day of classes, and he was already ahead of schedule. He'd been able to stop in at BPlate, one of the main dining rooms on campus, with Brian for some breakfast before his first class. Brian was not a morning person, but their schedule had them in early classes, so he'd had to drag him out of bed. That was going to be fun all season long. Now he headed out in search of the building where he'd walk into College Algebra with Professor Anderson.

Soon, Bunche Hall was in his sights. He'd made it to the building in just a few minutes, and cool AC blew into his face as he walked through the doors. Jayden strolled down the hall in search of his class. There were many students who walked past him, and instinctively, a smile came to his face as he made eye contact with several of them. A group of students rushed passed him, and one burly guy in the group bumped into him through all the hustle and bustle.

"Whoa! Sorry, man," Jayden called to the student that had bumped him.

The guy who hit him looked back at him and huffed in annoyance. Jayden rubbed his shoulder. "Okay. I'll just watch where I'm going next time," Jayden huffed back sarcastically. "This definitely isn't Texas anymore," he muttered to himself as he turned to head in the direction of his class.

Jayden was still rubbing his shoulder as he found his class and headed inside. At the front of the room the professor had her back turned to the class, already writing something on the board. Jayden then looked around the auditorium-style classroom, disappointed to see that most of the seats in the back of the room were already taken. He wished Brian had the same class as him today. It would have made picking where to sit so much easier.

There was an open seat next to a girl who seemed to be live streaming on her phone, talking about the first day of school and her outfit and make-up combination for the day. *Hard pass.* He scanned the room and saw another open seat next to an older gentleman, but he was... wearing a onesie? *Nope.* Jayden kept looking and finally spotted an open seat near the front next to another student who currently had his head in his hands, floppy black hair covering the tips of his fingers. *What's that all about?* Jayden wasn't sure he wanted to deal with whatever was going on there, but it seemed less harmless than the other options. More seats were being taken, and he didn't want to end up in the very first row. Although Jayden didn't know what to make of this guy, who now leaned his head back and groaned into his hands, he headed in that direction.

As Jayden took a seat, the guy next to him let out a heavy sigh, as he brought his forehead down on the table in front of him. Jayden tried his best to focus on the task at hand – getting his books out of his backpack and in order on the desk in front of him. He also took out some pencils, a pen, a highlighter, as well as a notebook. Jayden had always been studious. In fact, it was his performance on the court *and* in the classroom that secured his full ride.

Once everything was settled in front of him, he looked at the guy he'd sat next to. At least he wasn't making noises anymore, but why did he have nothing but a chewed-up pen in front of him? His eyebrows scrunched together. With his curiosity finally getting the best of him, Jayden decided to get to the bottom of it. He cleared his throat.

“Hey, man. I'm Jayden.” He put on his friendliest smile, and the guy looked over at him, forehead still touching the table. He seemed a little taken aback, as though he hadn't heard or noticed that someone sat next to him.

“Oh, hey,” he mumbled. “I'm Kory.” Kory sat up and looked forward then, his eyes seeming to gaze at the chewed-up pen. He sighed again.

“So... you ready for this math class or what?” Jayden said as he gestured to the pen in front of Kory.

“How could you tell?” Kory said. He chuckled, but it was dry and didn't last long. Soon, he hung his head again and slumped his shoulders before rubbing a hand over his face.

“Is that really all you brought to class, though?” Jayden questioned.

“Yeah.” Kory sighed for the third time. “I completely overslept. I don't know how, but I set my alarm for 7 p.m. instead of a.m.” He shook his head in disbelief. “I woke up ten minutes ago and just ran over here. I happened to find this pen in my pocket, actually.” He let out a sad laugh. “It must be my lucky day,” he said as he reached out to grab the sad chewed up pen. It really was laughable, but he pushed down the laughter threatening to escape.

“I guess it is your lucky day then.” Jayden couldn't help but chuckle. “It just so happens, however, that the most overprepared student in the room decided to sit right next to you.” Jayden extended his pointer fingers and aimed it at himself. This pulled out a more genuine chuckle from Kory, and his pale, pained look that he had since Jayden walked in seemed to clear up a little bit. “I've got two extra notebooks and more pencils than I will ever need in here.” Jayden rifled through the backpack that was still on his lap and grabbed a blue spiral and a pencil from his stash. He held them out to Kory.

“Are you serious right now?” Kory hesitantly lifted his hand to reach for the supplies.

“Why wouldn't I be?” Jayden asked.

“I-I don't kn-know. This is just... really nice of you. You... you don't even know me.”

Jayden shrugged but smiled reassuringly. “I really have way too much in here, anyway. You're doing me a favor by helping me lighten the load.”

“Wow... Thanks. You're a lifesaver.” Kory's eyes, which had been hard and hollow, now brightened, and Jayden actually noticed a hint of a smile forming on his face. This was a different Kory than Jayden had first sat next to. “I am the worst at math. I was so worried that if I got behind today, I wouldn't ever be able to catch up this semester.” Jayden chuckled more heartily now, and Kory's expression became confused. “What?” He laughed nervously.

“It really is your lucky day, man, because I also just so happen to be a math genius,” Jayden admitted. Kory's eyes widened.

“Really?”

“Well... that's what my mom tells me, at least.” Both guys looked at each other for a moment before erupting with laughter. As his laughter subsided, Jayden continued. “No, but seriously. I am pretty good at math, so I wouldn't mind helping you if you need it. Just let me know.” Jayden smiled again as Kory nodded his head. At that moment, the professor cleared her throat to begin speaking. Jayden and Kory's conversation died down, as did everyone else's.

“Good morning, class, and welcome to College Algebra,” Professor Anderson began, as she handed out the syllabus and started discussing the expectations for the term ahead of them. Once Jayden received his papers from the professor, he began highlighting and underlining information, writing notes down of all the professor was saying. In the corner of his eye, Kory did the same. When Professor Anderson found a break in her lecture, she asked students if they

had any questions. Jayden, among a few others, raised his hand. After calling on a few students before him, the professor finally directed her attention toward Jayden.

“Yes, you in the front. What is your question?” She asked.

“I was wondering if we will go over the required reading in class,” Jayden began. “Or should we take as many notes as we can while we read outside of class because our time here will be focused on the application of the material?” Jayden looked at her eagerly. He wanted nothing more than to succeed in this class. The professor smiled at him.

“Excellent question. Most of this class will be application. I expect each student to be ready to apply what we've learned in the reading that week to the assignments in class that day.” Professor Anderson walked to the rectangular podium in front of the blackboard and grabbed her textbook. “This is the book you should have for this class, and I’d like to show you what concepts you’ll be responsible to read about this week. Follow along with me.” Books rustled around the classroom. Jayden quickly opened his textbook to the correct page. “In our next class, this should not be new material. I expect you to stay on track and keep up with me throughout the semester. No excuses or exceptions.” Professor Anderson was petite, but her voice packed a punch. Despite her small frame and long, flowing blond hair that made her look more like a pop star than a college professor, Jayden could tell that she didn’t take anything lightly. Jayden made a mental note of this, keeping in mind to always stay on her good side. Next to him, Kory groaned quietly and brought both of his hands to his face. Jayden turned toward him, seeing Kory’s expression full of dismay.

“What's up, Kory?” he whispered.

“Did I mention that I haven’t had a chance to pick up my books yet?” His response came out muffled, as he spoke through his hands, before groaning again. “I was supposed to go to the

bookstore, but just kept putting it off.” He shook his head. “I am so unprepared for this right now.” Jayden quietly chuckled. He was happy he had sat next to Kory, despite his hesitation when he first saw him. Being able to help Kory made him feel right at home.

“Dude, I got you,” Jayden said. Jayden slid his open book between them so they could both follow along with the professor. Kory looked at Jayden, brought both his hands together in front of him and mouthed *thank you* to Jayden who smiled again and nodded his head before tuning back in to what the professor was going over. She listed the pages and explained that this amount of reading would be typical each week. Groans and murmurs of frustration came from the students around him. Professor Anderson seemed unphased as she kept talking.

“Does anyone have any questions about the workload?” Professor Anderson asked. Jayden's hand shot up immediately, and the professor pointed at him.

“Should we complete all of the practice problems with each section?” More groans sounded behind him. She hadn't mentioned doing work, but what was the harm in more practice?

“Actually, yes. Thank you for pointing that out.” The professor nodded at Jayden, clearly impressed. “And what is your name, young man?”

“My name is Jayden, ma'am.”

She nodded again before continuing to read through the syllabus. She went over the rest of the homework expectations before she went over the calendar and the due dates of homework and projects. Professor Anderson also pointed out the important test dates that all students should prepare for, including one that was just a few weeks away. Jayden swallowed. He'd always been good at school. He tested well and applied new concepts easily enough, plus math had always been one of his strong suits. However, in his first class of the year, everything was already

happening so quickly. Jayden tried to shake off his nerves. He'd be fine. As she asked around for questions again, Jayden was the only one who posed a few questions about the calendar.

Professor Anderson laughed as she answered his last question. "You seem to be one of the few who came prepared to ask questions, so it looks like it might just be a class between me and you this morning, Jayden." The professor chuckled, and Jayden joined in.

"It's still early, Professor. I'm sure once you call a few of them out, they'll wake right up, Ma'am." Jayden laughed again, and he looked around to see if anyone else was laughing with him. No one was smiling. He was met with deadpan stares and eyes glaring at him from quite a few students around the room. He'd only meant it as a joke, but no one looked happy with him. Kory was looking down at his paper, doodling in the corner. Jayden faced the front again.

"You know..." She put her hand to her chin as if she were thinking. "That's not a bad idea. I think I might do that." Her smile grew bigger as she looked out at the audience in front of her which had grown louder with groans from around the classroom. Jayden could hear students mumbling angrily behind him. Someone called him a brown-nosing suck-up which surprised him. Other people were talking about how annoying he was being and hating "guys like him." Jayden was used to sitting straight and tall, always admired, but each comment had him sinking lower into his seat. Sure, there'd been guys on the court from opposing teams talking trash, but here in class, for answering a couple questions? He'd never expected to upset anyone.

Professor Anderson was calling the class to attention now, silencing them from their groans of frustration, and Jayden hoped the hour was almost over with. However, he didn't want anyone to see him looking so defeated. He still had a face to put on, so he shrugged his shoulders obviously and continued taking notes on his syllabus as his professor spoke. To ease the tension in his own body, he let out a deep breath and leaned over to whisper to Kory.

“Still happy I sat here?” Jayden released a nervous chuckle. “Because you just might be my only friend in here after what I just pulled. I’m turning out to be public enemy number one.” Jayden was pleased to get a laugh out of Kory with that. At least not everyone hated him.

“If you can keep her from calling on me, I think this will make a great partnership.” Jayden laughed, the nervousness dissipating. Professor Anderson went through the rest of her syllabus, and Jayden sat there taking notes, now unbothered by his grumbling classmates. Before he knew it, class was over.

Kory grabbed his lone notebook and pencil while Jayden began packing up all his materials – extra pens, highlighters, notebooks, and all.

“That was fast, huh?” Jayden remarked.

“Are you kidding?” Kory said loudly. “That was the longest 50 minutes of my life.” Jayden just shook his head and laughed. Together, they began walking toward the exit.

“Well, since you really are some kind of math genius, do you think you could help me with all this?” Kory looked over at him, easily meeting his eyes because they were about the same height. “I’m not good at math at all. I already know I’m gonna need help.” It looked like this was hard for Kory to admit.

“I’m happy to help whenever you need it. We can even start working on the reading for this week today if you want. What’s your schedule look like?” Jayden watched Kory reach in his back pocket for his phone.

“At least I didn’t forget my phone this morning. I wrote my schedule in my notes. Let me see.” Kory paused as he navigated through his phone. Jayden watched him scroll on the screen and tap it a few times before he spoke again. “It looks like I have a break until after lunch. Then I have one more class today – geology.”

“That’s cool! I wanted to take that, but I've gotta do biology this semester. I'm pre-med.”

“Nice! No biology for me, though. I don’t know if I could ever go that route. I took it in high school, and that was enough. Science is not my thing.” Kory laughed, and Jayden joined in.

“Well, I've got Philosophy in a few minutes, but I'm free after that. Whaddaya say we meet after that around 11:30? We can look at the math assignment and then get some lunch. I'm meeting my roommate, Brian, at the Commons.”

“Yeah, okay. That sounds cool.”

“Nice. I’ll text you. Let me see your phone.” Jayden held out his hand, and Kory gave him his phone. He opened up the messaging app and sent himself a text message. “Now I've got yours too.” Jayden began walking in the opposite direction from Kory. “I guess I’ll see you in a little bit, then,” Jayden said, but Kory spoke up before Jayden got too far away.

“You know, this day was shaping up to be a pretty crappy one for me, but I think God knew I needed you to sit by me or something.” Jayden was taken aback by this statement. He forced a hesitant smile, not wanting to offend his new friend, but it was hard to hide his discomfort at the mention of God again, and how easily and openly Kory just attributed their meeting to Him. God was making His way into so many conversations these days, and Jayden was sick of it.

Chapter 12

Jayden's next class was not as interesting as his first. He got to class later than he wanted, so he ended up sitting alone in one of the seats at the front. He participated in this class as well, raising his hand to ask and answer questions. Just like Professor Anderson, this professor looked pleased with him, but more students rolled their eyes. The hostility was still shocking to him, without a friend as a buffer, loneliness settled in. Jayden stayed focused enough to take decent notes, and the hour was up before he knew it, thankfully. Jayden quickly packed up his stuff and exited the classroom so that he could call Brian about meeting for lunch. Jayden stopped just outside the classroom and leaned against the wall, waiting for Brian to pick up. He was afraid it was going to go to voicemail when Brian finally picked up by the fifth ring.

"Hey," Brian said. He sounded out of breath.

"Hey Brian. What's up? Why do you sound funny?"

"I just finished a set in the weight room."

"Didn't you have class right now?" Jayden asked.

"Yeah, but the professor went through the syllabus pretty quickly, so she let us out early. I ran over here to get a few sets in." Jayden rolled his eyes, not surprised he'd chosen to workout in his few minutes of free time. "What are you up to, anyway?" Brian asked.

"I just finished philosophy."

"That sucks," Brian said. Jayden wasn't surprised. If he had learned anything about Brian over the last few days, it was that he lived and breathed basketball. School was always second.

"It was actually pretty dope," Jayden said. He didn't want to share how isolated he'd felt in the last class or how easily annoyed his classmates seemed to get with him. He hoped it was

first day jitters and nothing that should be a cause for concern... or an excuse for Brian to make fun of him even more. Jayden decided to stick to positive reviews. "I'm liking my classes so far."

"That's because you're a nerd," Brian said. Jayden could hear the smile in his voice again, and they both laughed. "I'm kidding. I'm glad you like your classes." Brian sounded genuine, although Jayden was positive that if Brian were standing in front of him, he'd be rolling his eyes.

"Thanks, man. How much longer are you gonna be in the weight room?"

"I've just got a few more sets. I'll be done in about 15 minutes."

"Alright," Jayden said as he pushed off the wall and started walking to the entrance.

Jayden pushed through the door and found himself outside in the sunshine again. Still, the breeze was cool around him. He could definitely get used to this.

"The team is meeting up for an unofficial practice later." Brian chuckled halfheartedly.

"What do you mean unofficial?" Jayden paused.

"The team captain," Brian began with bitterness in his tone, "came in the weight room not too long ago yelling about it, saying everybody needed to be there." He chuckled coldly again. "He told us to spread the word since Coach isn't calling this practice and probably won't be for a while. He wants everyone to show up from a scrimmage or something. He called it *team bonding*," Brian spit out. "But I'm pretty sure he just wants to size everybody up. He says we're conditioning but he gave a dirty look to anyone who groaned about it. He even threatened people who thought of skipping." Brian paused, huffing angrily. "It was ridiculous."

"Who is this guy?" Jayden shook his head, angry now, too. "No way he's the captain acting like that. I'm all up for playing, but this guy sounds like a real piece of work."

"Oh, yeah. He's a ray of sunshine." Brian deadpanned, and they both laughed. At least it was mostly genuine this time. "He is also definitely the team captain."

“Great. Well, I can't wait to meet him.” Sarcasm filled his voice. “Count me in, though.”

Jayden had resumed his walk, hurrying to meet Kory at the Northern Lights Cafe.

“That's it? No hesitation? Even with this guy?”

“Like I said, I'm all up for it.” Jayden spoke with confidence. “There's nothing like being on the court, even if there is some big-headed captain trying to boss us around.”

“Well, you asked for it,” Brian said. Jayden could picture him shrugging his shoulders. Jayden had become familiar with several of Brian's mannerisms in the last few days.

The café came into Jayden's view, and his stomach growled. It hadn't been that long since he had eaten breakfast, but he was dying for more food already. He and Kory were going to work on some of their math reading at one of the tables outside before ordering anything since Brian was supposed to eat with them. Jayden wasn't sure how long he could wait for him.

“You almost ready for lunch, man? I'm starving,” Jayden said, hoping to rush Brian to finish his workout.

“It's barely past 11.”

“Yes, I know that. And your point is?” Brian laughed again. Jayden hoped that meant that he wasn't too focused on his workout. Maybe he would slip out early.

“I guess I don't have a point.”

“That's what I thought, so hurry up!” Jayden saw Kory sitting at a table with his math book open, his face already covered with confusion. Jayden laughed.

“I'll be done here soon. Text me where we're meeting to eat.”

“You got it,” Jayden said. “Later, man.” Jayden hung up the phone as he reached Kory's side. Saying “what's up” to Kory, he opened up the textbook and flipped to this week's reading, wishing that time would fly by quickly.

Right now, Jayden wished he hadn't eaten so much at lunch. He could feel his food sloshing around in his stomach, and he did not like it. This "scrimmage," as Brian called it, was like a boot camp with an uptight drill sergeant that Jayden was not prepared for. He was currently running up and down the court doing suicides. It was their fourth one, and he didn't know when they'd ever stop.

He was making his last run to the far baseline before returning to the beginning when a whistle sounded from across the court. Jayden stopped mid-sprint and looked in the direction the whistle had come from. He wasn't surprised to see River, their team captain, running his hand over his face and shaking his head.

"You freshman are a bunch of chumps!" He yelled. "How you punks made it on the team, I'll never know. You can barely keep up running down this court, and you're somehow slowing the rest of us down too!" He let out a frustrated groan. Jayden looked around the court. All the guys had their hands on their knees, breathing heavily. Each of them had been giving it their all, without much of a break in between anything, and Jayden seethed with anger. He looked back at River, not a drop of sweat running down his pale complexion and not a single gelled hair out of place in his perfectly styled, spiked blond hair. The sight of him made him even angrier. River could have immediately changed into jeans and a t-shirt, and no one would even know he had been on the court with them. He had put in no work this afternoon and had been doing nothing but yelling and blowing on that stupid whistle. Jayden was tired of it.

"The only reason we're running these suicides is because most of your conditioning is crap! I thought we could play some quick games but watching that was torture. You guys were screwing up simple passes, dribbling terribly, and barely able to keep up with the upperclassmen

here! I can see why that is now, after watching your pathetic running over the last ten minutes. Did you losers sit around eating donuts all summer? That is not what champions are made of!”

Jayden narrowed his eyes at River, shaking his head. The audacity of this guy! He had a lot of nerve talking about them when he was sitting around looking pretty. When Jayden had been team captain, he put himself through the worst of the practices and conditioning workouts. A team is only as good as their leader, and from the looks of it, their leader sucked. He also loved to hear himself talk because he was still going.

“Coach may have thought it was too early to start practicing, but after seeing your crusty moves on this court, I know we're already behind. No way am I letting some rookies ruin my senior season ‘cause they can't play ball. My three-legged dog plays better than you, punks!” A few guys around the circle, more upperclassmen who looked like they would follow River into fire and had been nodding to everything he had been saying, laughed. Jayden rolled his eyes and couldn't take another second of this.

“Give it a rest,” Jayden mumbled under his breath. Some guys turned in his direction, and River's head snapped up. Their eyes met. Jayden must have spoken louder than he intended to.

“What did you just say, freshman?” River's eye twitched, and he began walking over to where Jayden stood. Jayden didn't want to get into this, but he hated seeing someone talk down to people, and that's all River had been doing. Someone had to put this guy in his place.

“I said just chill out, man. We got to play as a team for all of fifteen minutes before you started yelling and making us kill ourselves running suicides. We're working our butts off out here while you've been yelling and blowing that whistle from the sidelines.” Jayden's arms moved as he spoke, pointing out his tired teammates and the place where River had stood to watch it all. Jayden then looked around for support. If he had been back home, his boys would

have stepped up with a hearty chorus of “yeahs!” from all around. They’d be right there, standing up with him against this jerk of a captain. Yet this circle of guys was filled with nothing but strangers apart from Brian. None were making eye contact with him. A few coughs came from around the group, and half of them were looking down, kicking at stuff with their shoes. The other half had their eyes on River, fear holding them back as they waited for River to put him in his place. Jayden let out a sad laugh and shook his head. Jayden finally found Brian who *was* looking at him and waving his hand back and forth in front of his neck, telling him to cut it out. Jayden rolled his eyes, turning his direction back to River.

They were eye-to-eye now. River was a few inches taller than Jayden, but he had a much larger build and must have weighed 220 pounds easily, in comparison to Jayden’s 175. Although his build was much heftier, Jayden held his eye contact, refusing to back down.

“Got anything else to say, freshman?” River’s voice was cold now. Jayden was sure River wanted to intimidate him, but Jayden was oddly confident in this moment.

“Yeah. A lot actually. Why don't you just let us play?” He looked around, and he could feel in the room that people wanted this. His teammates needed this. “You could get in here and play, too, instead of just bossing us around. We’re still getting used to each other, but we're never gonna get any better if you keep blowing that whistle to yell at us or make us run right when we’re starting to move together as a team.” Jayden had always had a way with words. His teammates loved all his inspirational speeches at half time when they were going up against a tough opponent. He always said just what everyone needed to hear to get in gear and bring home the win. Jayden could feel that same feeling now. They were all getting behind him, and they would take down this opponent. “So whaddaya say? Just let us play, right guys?” Jayden looked around at his teammates again, and no one was looking at him. Whatever he’d been feeling, he

was alone now, isolated just as he had been in class earlier today. Even Brian was still motioning to him to back down. Jayden couldn't believe it. When he looked back at River, he had actually moved closer and was now only inches from Jayden's face.

“Look, freshman. I don't know who you think you are, but this is my team.” If possible, his voice was even icier than it had been earlier. “*I* lead these practices, *I* lead the games, and *I* lead us to victory.” Every time he'd said “I,” River had gotten louder and louder. “The last thing I need is some smart-mouth rookie showing up like he's been leading this team for two seasons when, in fact, that has been me, *or* like he knows better than I do when he actually knows nothing at all. How about you keep your mouth shut and do as I say? You think you can do that, loser?” A sinister smirk curved along the left side of River's face as he stared down at Jayden who had clenched his hands into fists at his side, but he didn't make a move. His mouth moved into a straight line and his eyes narrowed again. He could see himself hitting this guy in the jaw. He could sense how satisfying the contact would be. As much as he hadn't wanted to get into anything, he wanted to hit River square in the face and knock that stupid smile right off it.

Soon, Jayden a hand came down on his shoulder, and he tensed at the feeling until he realized that Brian had moved over to get his friend's attention and steer him away from River. Jayden looked over at his friend, and the spell spoke. His anger dissipated a little, and he let himself be moved, surprised at what he had been about to do, still feeling the urge to direct his rage at this buffoon he had to call his team captain.

“Come on, Jay. It's not worth it,” Brian whispered. Jayden looked back at River, slightly resisting Brian's attempt to keep moving him in the opposite direction.

“Yeah, *Jay*.” River chuckled. “Listen to your boyfriend over there before you start something you can't finish.” River's smirk widened, egging Jayden on. Jayden moved to whip

his body around and finish what he'd meant to do earlier, but Brian's hold tightened on his shoulder, and he stayed right where he was, glaring at River one last time. Jayden looked over to Brian, anger still filling his expression, before nudging out of his hold and stalking down the court, ready for his next set of suicides. River laughed as he addressed the rest of the team that remained in front of him.

“Okay, everybody.” He clapped his hands. “Where were we then? Let's get back to it!” His voice was unphased, and he blew his whistle, getting everybody back in line. As Jayden walked away, River's voice became lower, and Jayden's anger grew louder. “Maybe once you guys stop sucking out there with these runs, we can move to some man-to-man defense, huh?”

He laughed again, and Jayden stood watching him from the baseline, not at all surprised that he wasn't joining them down there. He let out a pitied laugh before bending lower, in position to run once River blew on his whistle again. As the sound travelled throughout the gym, everyone began to move, and Jayden moved aggressively down the court, refusing to let anyone pass him by. No one, especially River, was going to stand in his way.

Chapter 13

The sound of the locker slamming shut pierced Jayden's ears, and the row of lockers shook from the force. Other players in the locker room looked in his direction; some looked confused, many looked annoyed. Jayden ignored them and huffed in frustration.

"That was bull, Brian!" Jayden's voice came out low and angry.

"I tried to warn you earlier," Brian whispered back. "I told you he came in the weight room yelling at everyone about this practice."

"Yeah... I know, I just—" Jayden sighed, running his hand over his face as he paced the two feet in front of him. "I just didn't think it was that bad. That guy is a nightmare."

"I know."

Jayden looked up. He was met with resignation in Brian's eyes, and that just angered him more. He couldn't stand for this. He wouldn't. Jayden stopped pacing and leaned his forehead against his locker. He took a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself, feeling his heart beating out of control. Even as he took each breath, he kept replaying images of that sad excuse for a practice and River's cocky grin, and he just got angry all over again. He stood tall, turning to face Brian, hating the way his first afternoon with the team had made him feel.

"How am I supposed to play for a guy like that? When all he does is tear us down?"

Jayden shook his head and resumed pacing. "That's the worst way to lead. In the couple of years I was captain, I would have never treated a guy on the team like that, even if he did suck, which I don't. None of us do!" Running his hands through the curly mop on his head, Jayden groaned.

"We worked together, encouraged each other, until we got better, and we won state! It's that simple." His arms were outstretched now above his head, and more heads turned his way again.

He knew he needed to calm down, but he couldn't seem to ease his racing heart. Dropping his hands, he leaned on the lockers behind him. Next to him, Brian let out a sigh.

“This isn't high school anymore. This is NCAA ball. Things aren't like they used to be.”

“You think I don't know that?” Jayden turned to face him. “I get that the stakes are higher, but that doesn't mean I can play for someone who tears us down like this.” Before he knew it, his fist clenched and slammed backward on the lockers. “There's no way Coach can know he's like this, but he needs to know!” Jayden moved to get off the lockers and headed toward the office when a smug voice spoke up from behind him.

“Who needs to know what?”

The hairs on Jayden's arm rose at once. It had only been a couple of hours, and already that voice was like the sound of death. Jayden turned. There was River, coming around the end of the row of lockers with a grin on his face. He stuck out his bottom lip in a pout before he spoke.

“Is something bothering you, Freshman?” River grinned, and Jayden seethed at the condescending tone that dripped from River's voice.

“Other than you? No really.” Jayden feigned confidence, but he couldn't keep his hands from shaking. No one had ever treated him like this, and it scared him, as much as he hated to admit. He knew River had put in more time on this team than he had, and Jayden wasn't delusional enough to believe that having the team captain against him wouldn't be a big deal. Jayden just hoped he could figure out how to end this... and soon.

River moved in quickly then and shoved Jayden against the lockers. Everyone in the locker room stopped what they were doing, but no one stepped in. Brian looked shocked, but he

also made no move to get River away from him. Jayden looked at River, seeing nothing but joy in his expression. His anger fumed.

“What's your problem, man?” Jayden said as he pushed off the lockers and got in River’s face.

“You're my problem,” River spit back.

“How am I your problem? You’re the one who’s been chewing me a new one since I walked onto that court. We’re supposed to be teammates.” Jayden lifted his hands to push River back, but he stopped himself. A fight on his first day with the team captain would only make things worse. River looked at Jayden then, a challenge in his eyes.

“Yeah, maybe so,” he said. “But I see that same stupid look in your eyes like I do with every other freshman– like you think you can run the place.”

“What are you talking about, man?”

“Don't play dumb with me, Fish. I’m just here to set the record straight.” River moved within inches of Jayden's face and looked him up and down with annoyance clear on his face. “Before you go and tattle to your daddy about being picked on, I'd listen to your friend here.” His grin grew wider. “We all heard your little temper tantrum, but this guy is right.” He motioned to Brian. “We're not in high school and you're not at the top anymore. You're a fish. In fact, with the way that you played today, you're the scum on fish.” River’s eyes seemed to light up with every word he spoke, and fear pervaded his mind. River was enjoying this, enjoying bringing him down. “I say you worry more about your game than on tattling about this because I can make your life a living hell, and I just wanted to make that clear. You got that... Fish?” River’s voice was as cold as ice, but there was fire in his eyes.

“Yeah,” Jayden said quietly. “I got it.”

River took a few steps back then, the smile on his face never moving an inch. “Besides, I’m only just trying to help you get better. I know you can do it.” His voice changed then. No longer was it a menacing threat. Instead, he seemed genuine. It was night and day from what Jayden had just heard. As River continued, Jayden grew more confused. “Coming to a new school and an established team can be really difficult, intimidating even. I’d hate for you to feel that way, so let me know if I can help you with anything. That’s what I’m here for.” If it weren’t for the menacing smirk on his face, Jayden would have thought River seriously hoped to help him.

Just then, Jayden saw movement on his right. When he turned to look, Coach Grimes walked up beside him. His stature matched River’s, at just a few inches taller than Jayden. His salt and pepper hair and creases at the corners of his eyes, due to the smile he currently had on his face, gave away his older age.

“Attaboy, River. I love seeing you help out a fellow player. Take care of this one here.” Coach Grimes pat Jayden on the back, and Jayden knew. Coach had only heard the last part of River’s speech. The kind words, the encouraging tone— all of it —was for show, for Coach. Jayden groaned inwardly. He was in way over his head, and Coach Grimes was oblivious. He turned to look at his coach who was smiling proudly at him.

“Jayden’s really something special,” Coach Grimes went on, still talking to River. “I know you and Jayden here will make great teammates. He’s already a phenomenal player, so I’m sure you’ll show him the ropes and make him feel right at home.” Despite the terror that had been these last few hours, he was happy to see that his Coach seemed to believe in him, even if River hadn’t been doing any of the things Coach seemed to think he would. River now looked at Jayden menacingly, briefly narrowing his eyes before their coach noticed.

“You can count on me to do just that, Coach.” Both River and Coach smiled.

“That’s just what I like to hear.” He clapped both boys on the back before turning his attention back to River. “How was your time on the court today, then? How's the team looking?” He looked around at everyone, Brian included, which made Jayden think Coach was looking for answers from all of them. “Official practices start soon. What are we working with out there, boys?” The coach’s gaze was expectant, and Brian was the first to speak up.

“Uh... I think it went well.” Brian’s response sounded as fake as it was. Jayden shook his head. He needed someone to step up and tell the truth, and if it had to be him, he would do it. He cleared his throat which brought all eyes to him. He tried to ignore River as he spoke.

“It could have gone better. We were all trying to play well together, learn each other's strengths and weaknesses to see how we can best support each other as a team.” Here was his chance. Coach had made an opening, and Jayden was going to walk right through it. “It would have been a great practice, actually, if it weren't for—”

“If it weren't for me,” River interrupted. “I may have pushed them a little hard today. You know how I can get sometimes, Coach. I just want what's best for the team, for all of us to excel.” River’s face grew earnest and innocent. Jayden, bewildered, knew that River was putting on his act again. There was no way Coach would believe this though. *Right?*

“You and I both, River,” Coach responded. “That's why you're captain and the leader of this team. You're not afraid to help your fellow players by critiquing their playing when necessary. Not a lot of people can do that amongst their peers.” Jayden couldn’t let this happen. Coach was all wrong. How could he not see that?

“Critique?” Jayden began. “Coach, I—”

“I think I may have been too hard on Jayden which is why I came over here to check in with him.” River smiled at him. He would not let Jayden get a word in.”

“Jayden, you'd do well to listen to River.” His voice became sterner as he addressed Jayden. This is his fourth year on the team. Something that might come off harsh is only because he knows this team inside and out, and he knows the competition. Don't let a little criticism get you down.” Coach gently shook his shoulder then. “He's only trying to help.”

“Thanks, Coach,” River said. Jayden let out a quiet scoff.

“Now, get on out of here, boys. You must have better things to do than just hanging around in the locker room talking about basketball.” Coach Grimes laughed then. “As much as I love dedication, basketball isn't life.” With that, he turned and walked in the direction of his office. They all watched him go, and no one said a word until the door closed behind him. Jayden heard a chuckle.

“You hear that?” River smiled. “I'm only trying to help you.”

“That's a load of bull, and we both know it.” Jayden gritted his teeth.

“Yeah, maybe... but Coach doesn't know it.” River's gaze moved to Brian and circled back to Jayden. “You think you're the only newcomer who's tried to rat me out to Coach and talk about all their hurt feelings?” River chuckled. “This isn't my first rodeo, Texas boy.” River laughed again, and Jayden tried to hide his surprise. He wasn't successful.

“Aww, don't look so shocked. You didn't think I'd read up on our new scholarship kid?” His laugh was dry now. “I know all about you. It's a classic story, really.” River's voice took on a country twang as he continued. “A small-town boy turns around his Podunk high school team and takes them to the state championship victory in his senior year. The crowd goes wild.” River shook his head and spat out the next words with disgust.

“Yeah. I know it all... and I'm unimpressed. These are the big leagues, Fish. You may have been a hometown hero, but you're nothing here, nothing but another insignificant freshman that I have to work on making half as good as me just so we can stand a fighting chance.” With each word he spoke, River grew more disgusted, and Jayden only grew angrier. “I suggest you take your high and mighty attitude and shove it. There's no room for it here. This is *my* team, punk. You'll do well to keep your place and hold your tongue like your little friend here.” River nodded in Brian's direction who now looked down at his feet.

Jayden hated this. He hated seeing how low River made Brian feel, but Jayden didn't know what to do about it now. Jayden looked around. All the other players were going about their business, ignoring the exchange between him and River, ignoring River's blatant threats and even worse behavior. It's like they were all used to him acting this way or too afraid to do anything about it. Even their coach was blinded by River's seniority and the work he had put in over the years. He couldn't see how River was poisoning the team, and Jayden knew that nothing right now he did would fix anything. Despite every bone in his body screaming at him to respond, he took a deep breath and looked to the side before looking down as well.

“That's what I thought.” The smug smirk returned, and River placed his hand on Jayden's shoulder. Jayden tensed and held in the urge to swipe River's arm off him. “Well then... Until next time, Rookie. Maybe you'll finally show me what you're gonna bring to the table.” He turned to walk away but stopped after just a few steps. Looking back, he said, “If you ask me, though, I say you're never gonna live up to the hype.”

Chapter 14

In the weeks that followed, Jayden did exactly what River said he would: he didn't live up to anyone's expectations, especially his own. Practice had officially started, and Jayden hated letting everyone down. Most practices ended with Coach yelling at him, and the stress of performing so terribly was seeping into every other area of his life.

As Jayden and Kory walked together across campus one afternoon, he looked up at the sun beating down on him, trying to regain a semblance of peace. Students passed on either side of them, the sounds of laughter reaching him from conversations of those nearby. He observed everyone around him. Some students sat on the grass. A few of them were immersed in reading a book, sitting alone by a tree or on a bench. Others sat in groups, studying and laughing, seemingly not having a care in the world. They were happy and enjoying the moments that this campus and their friends brought them. Jayden was envious. A couple of students were even throwing a football back and forth at each other. Even when one of them dropped the ball, there was no fighting, no tension. They just got along. Jayden shook his head.

What a lie his life had become.

In every phone conversation to his parents or Grace, he told them how great everything was going for him, although nothing could be further from the truth. He wished that he could share all his frustrations with them. He wished he could share how hard of a time he was having on the team, how he spent so much time practicing and trying to keep up with the demands of a college team that he didn't have time to study for his classes like he should have let alone focus on his classes when he was sitting in them.

But he couldn't and he wouldn't. As far as they would ever know, school was a dream. His friends were amazing, his team was working out better than he thought it would, and his

classes were a breeze. In fact, the first game was coming up in just a few short weeks, and he was determined to make everything he had been telling them true by that time. He knew he could do it, and that resolve to fix everything that had been going wrong was what kept him going. The resolve to not let Charlie down, or his mom or Grace or Coach, kept him going.

Next to him, Kory had begun to talk. He tried to focus his attention on what Kory was saying, tuning in at the middle of a sentence.

“—I do is eat. I can’t seem to stop.” He laughed. “Everyone talks about the freshman fifteen, but now I really get it. I feel like other than going to my classes and trying to keep up with the mountain of homework I have, I’m either sleeping or eating.” Kory looked at him, smiling and oblivious to the storm raging inside Jayden that he was doing his best to run from, but Jayden preferred it like that. In fact, he perfected his performance in making people think everything was just fine. As usual, he put on his classic smile and laughed.

“Dude, you sound just like my sister. My mom told me she’d been complaining about that. Don’t tell me you’re gonna start whining about it like she does?” Jayden shoved Kory playfully in the shoulder, making him laugh in response. If you’re that worried about it, you can always come hit up the weight room with me any day.” Jayden smiled, knowing this was the last thing Kory wanted to do. He and Brian were opposites in this way. Jayden couldn’t seem to get Brian out of the weight room, but Kory would never be caught dead there.

“Wow, good one,” he laughed out. “Too bad that would involve me leaving my bed... and that is not happening.”

“Careful, man. If you don’t do more than eat and sleep, that freshman fifteen can easily turn into the freshman forty.” Jayden eyed him curiously, hoping he’d decide to come by the

weight room sometime. He could use another friend in there. Other than Brian, everyone else steered clear of him, knowing that River's target was on his back.

"As horrifying as forty more pounds sounds, from what I hear, running into your team captain in the weight room sounds even worse." Kory eyed him back, and Jayden did everything he could to keep his face from falling. Every day, he tried harder and harder to keep his dwindling position on the team and his horrible captain off his mind, but it all seemed to come back to that. Jayden tried his best to seem unphased as he responded.

"Aw, man. Don't remind me." Jayden rolled his eyes.

"Has practice gotten any better?" There was genuine concern in Kory's voice. Jayden did not want to talk about this right now, but with Kory looking at him so intently, he didn't think he could sidestep it as easily as he did with his family over the phone. He sighed.

"Honestly, not at all. I thought after a couple of weeks I'd get the hang of this, but I can't seem to grasp it. Playing here is nothing like playing in Iris Cove. That and River harassing me every time he can has just thrown me off my game big time." Jayden kicked at a rock on the sidewalk. "When he said he would make my life a living hell, I think he decided to make that his personal mission of the semester." Jayden groaned.

"Dude, that sucks." Kory let out a deep breath and rubbed the back of his neck. "I still don't understand why he's so irked."

"Neither do I. I'm not a threat to him which he reminds me of daily."

"Maybe that's just what he wants you to think."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if he convinces you that you don't need to try or deserve to be here, then he wins because you won't be around long enough to take his position." Kory shrugged, and Jayden put

his hands in his hair, desperately wanting to pull it out, but knowing that wouldn't do anyone any good. Jayden absolutely hated this.

“I don't understand it. I'm his teammate. Shouldn't he be encouraging me and building me up?” He laughed, but there was nothing funny about it.

“This isn't a small town in Texas anymore. This is LA. Everyone is out for themselves here.” Kory shrugged. “I'm not saying it's fair. That's just the way it is. Cutthroat.”

Jayden knew that Kory was trying to make sense of what was going on, but Jayden didn't want or need him to make sense of it. He just wanted it to stop.

“Well, I can't take it anymore. Did I tell you that I found my uniform, all of my clothes, and my shoes soaking wet in my locker the other day.” He shook his head. “I don't even know how they got into my locker to do that.”

“Well, that doesn't sound so bad,” Kory said. Jayden knew he was trying to look on the bright for him. Jayden had tried that too until he realized it was pointless.

“Yeah. I thought the same thing... until I got a whiff of it.” Jayden looked over. Kory's eyes grew wide at this revelation.

“Aw, man. What was it?”

“It was pickle juice.” He let out a sad chuckle. “I guess it still could have been worse, but they had soaked all my stuff in pickle juice— even my gym bag! I washed it a few times just to get the smell out, but I feel like I still have the stench of pickle juice on my hands.” Jayden brought his hands to his face, sniffing them. “Phantom pickle juice.”

“You can't say anything about it?” Kory wasn't laughing now, and his voice had taken on a tone of seriousness. This was anything but funny.

“Yeah, right. The one time I tried to do something, Coach basically gave him a gold medal for being the world's best captain,” Jayden spit out. “I think that's why it's so bad for me to begin with. River was pissed that I tried to go to Coach, and now he's punishing me for it. If I had kept my mouth shut like Brian, maybe I wouldn't be in this situation.”

“You shouldn't just have to take this either, team captain or not.”

“I guess.” Jayden shrugged his shoulders. “I just hope it stops soon. I don't know how much more I can take of this.” Despite what he said, Jayden had lost all hope that it would stop.

Kory pat Jayden on the back, and the two walked on in silence for a few seconds. Soon, loud laughter and yelling came from behind him. He turned his head toward the sound only to see River and some of the guys from the team walking in his direction. His stomach dropped immediately. For a moment, he thought of turning and walking in the other direction, but he knew it would be pointless. He was sure River had already seen him. As if he knew his thoughts, River made eye contact with him in that moment, and his mouth turned up in a devious smile. Jayden let out a low grumble.

“Oh geez,” he said.

Kory looked at Jayden, and Jayden was sure Kory could see the dread all over his face, could see he'd paled, even for his dark complexion.

“What is it?” Kory asked. Jayden nodded in the direction of River before turning to Kory.

“Speak of the devil,” Jayden said. “It looks like you won't have to make it to the weight room to meet him after all.” At that moment, their paths crossed, and Jayden looked at River.

“Well, well. Here he is again. The turnover king.” River's voice was menacing, as usual. “How many was it at practice today again?” One of the guys walking with him spoke up.

“Had to have been at least... nine, I think.” At that revelation, River sucked in a breath and scrunched his face as if he were in pain.

“Ooooooh. That must be rough, man. Tell me how it feels to be a letdown to your coach and your entire team.” River laughed then, and the guys around him joined in. Jayden wanted nothing more than to disappear right now, but he couldn’t run— not with everyone watching, especially Kory. With as much confidence as he could muster, he spoke.

“Give it a rest, River. I'm not in the mood to deal with your BS right now.”

“Did you hear that, boys?” River looked around at the guys with him and smiled. “Little Jayden here isn't in the mood.” All the guys, along with River, began laughing again. Jayden was not going to just stand around and be their punchline, so Jayden shoved past him.

“Leave me alone, man.” He almost made it past him, but River moved in closer and shoved him back.

“He said leave him alone.” Kory’s voice came out stronger than Jayden had ever heard it. He had almost forgotten Kory was here until he spoke up. Jayden turned to look at him, as did River. He raised one eyebrow as he turned his whole body toward him.

“Who are you? His bodyguard?” River huffed. “Shut up and get out of my face.” He turned back to Jayden then. “Pretty soon, everyone will know what I have known all along. You’ll have to tell your family, and you'll be a letdown to them too.”

Jayden looked down, unable to speak. River had a strange hold over Jayden that kept him from being the person he had always known. Then again, maybe he had never been that person. Maybe the person he had been in Iris Cove was the lie, and this timid version of him was the person he had been all along.

“What? Got nothing to say now, punk?” Jayden didn’t have to look up to know that he was smiling. The upbeat tone in his voice made that clear. “Everything will be alright, Fish.” He laughed. “It’ll be hard to live with, but you might as well come to terms with this now, so you don’t waste anymore of our time.” He was seething now, aiming the dagger for the kill. Jayden made eye contact then, and it was the worst decision he could have made. River’s smile widened, enjoying every blow he was delivering to Jayden. “You suck, Freshman, and you don’t belong here. The sooner you get that through your head, the better it will be for everybody.” Kory, who had remained by Jayden’s side, moved to stand between them, now shielding him from River.

“I think you’ve said enough.” His voice was firm. “You should probably go now.” River laughed, and the sound was the final push of the dagger into the center of his heart.

“Don’t worry, Bodyguard. I was done anyway.” At that, River nodded at his boys, and they all began to walk away from Jayden and Kory. It wasn’t until the guys rounded the nearest building and were out of sight that Jayden’s breathing returned to normal. It was only a moment later that he was overcome with shame. He’d just stood there like the punk River knew he was. He couldn’t even stand up for himself. He hadn’t uttered a single word. Why couldn’t he say anything to him now? He looked over to Kory who hadn’t said anything since they walked away. The wary look on his face told Jayden all that he needed to know. Instead of giving in to the pity that he knew Kory must be feeling, Jayden tried to shake it off.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me or why he intimidates me so much.” He laughed. “I’ve dealt with guys twice his size on the court and four times the ego. I’ll be able to handle it next time. He just caught me off guard.” He shrugged his shoulders. It was hard to make eye contact with Kory, so he couldn’t tell if he believed him or not.

“Don't sweat it. You can't be strong all the time, you know? Sometimes you need a little help, and I've got your back.” He began walking again, and Jayden instinctively followed. “How could I not? If something happened to you, who would be my math tutor?” Kory asked, laughing. Jayden could tell he was trying to lighten the mood, and Jayden was grateful for it. He laughed in return but remained quiet, lost in his thoughts, until Kory pulled him out of them.

“Hey,” Kory said. “River's gone. It's over.”

“I know that,” Jayden said, a bit defensively. “It's over.” Jayden shook his head again and mumbled to himself. “For now, at least.”

The boys continued their walk through the campus, close to the dining hall now, but Jayden had lost his appetite. He couldn't shake his nerves or the look that had been on River's face. River was nowhere near done with him, and Jayden knew it.

This was far from over.

Chapter 15

Sweat dripped down Jayden's face and neck, soaking through his practice jersey. Coach Grimes was working them to the bone at practice today. There were no shortage of whistle blows and ferocious yells – most of them aimed toward Jayden. He was fumbling most of the passes, and he'd missed three lay-ups in a row. Coach was red. Jayden dribbled the ball down the court, calling out the next play and pointing his teammates to their positions. As he shook his head, he tried to clear his mind of everything running through it, thinking of all the practices he'd been messing up lately. *Focus.* All it took was one glance down the court at River in the paint to knock him out of his senses again. River had been relentless this week. While others could pass off his treatment as “hazing the rookie,” Jayden knew it was more than that. He was setting out to make his life miserable, just like he said he would. River smirked at Jayden and rushed toward him, getting in his face, waving his arms wildly. *Brush it off. Keep moving forward.* Jayden couldn't find an opening, and River never stopped smiling, the glint in his eye becoming more devious with every passing second. *You've got this.* Jayden decided to shoot a three-pointer from where he stood. Looking at the basket and breathing confidence into his heart and mind, he positioned his arms and raised them toward the sky, releasing the ball with the perfect precision that he was so accustomed to.

And River slammed the ball to the ground.

An opposing player had already recovered the ball and had driven it all the way to the basket for a layup. Jayden watched all this happen in slow motion. River chuckled menacingly. He had failed... again. River whispered in Jayden's ear saying, “Nice turnover, Rookie,” as Coach's whistle blared for several seconds from the other side of the court. Jayden looked in his direction. Coach was pissed off. *Cue the yelling.*

“What was that? Jayden, are you even playing the same game as the rest of the team? You’re sleeping out there!” Coach had already crossed the court, yelling in Jayden’s face. Even though Coach Grimes was only a few inches taller, Jayden had never felt as small as he did now. “You’re sloppy today. In fact, you’re sloppy a lot lately. I could get my grandma out here on this court, and she walks with a cane, and she’d still play better than you!” Jayden tried to focus on what Coach was saying, but all he could focus on was the coffee that lingered on Coach’s breath, the red vein that was popping out on the left side of his forehead, and the laughter coming from River behind him. “Are you going to say anything, or are you going to keep standing there looking like an idiot?”

“C-Coach, I–” Jayden fumbled over his words just like he had done with the ball.

“Speak up, Son!”

“I’m sorry, Coach. I don’t know what’s going on. I’m not thinking straight. It’s a mess.”

“You’re right. It is a mess, and you better clean it up! The first game is in two weeks and you’re working your way further and further down the bench!”

“Yessir.” Jayden shrunk into himself. He was used to all eyes being on him, but not like this. He was always at the top of his game, and this was unfamiliar territory.

“You want to play in that game, Jayden?”

“Yes, Coach. You know I do.” This was pathetic; he was pathetic. He knew he shouldn’t, but Jayden couldn’t help but sneak a glance over at River. He immediately regretted that decision. River had his arms crossed and a smug smile plastered on his face. River raised an eyebrow, silently challenging Jayden as he had been all week. Jayden looked down and shook his head.

“Then start to act like it– start to play like it!”

“Being on the court used to be so freeing, my favorite thing in the world. Now— now it’s a nightmare.” Jayden shook his head, zipped up his bag, and sat next to Brian, staring at his shoes.

“He’s getting exactly what he wants from you then.” Brian shook his head.

“I don’t even know why he’s targeting me. What did I ever do to him?”

“I really have no idea, man,” Brian replied, shrugging his shoulders. “River seems like the kind of guy who needs to be in control, who needs to be the top dog. I think he saw you coming in here and taking that away from him.”

“He doesn’t even know me!” Jayden shot up from the bench, frustration coursing through his body. He slammed his hand on the locker in front of him.

In the corner of his eye, Jayden saw Brian drop his gaze to the floor. He knew that Brian didn’t like seeing Jayden this way. Jayden noticed that Brian’s posture had become more rigid, but he soon exhaled deeply, as if trying his best to remain calm. In the silence that followed, Jayden did the same. He returned to his place on the bench.

“Sorry, man. He just gets under my skin.” Jayden looked down at his shoes once more.

“You know he’s watched film of you. You’re the golden boy from the small town who single-handedly brought that state championship home to a team that had been losing for years. I mean, I’ve even watched videos of you playing. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before.” Brian paused, and there was earnestness in his voice. “You probably don’t remember it, but you played my high school in an off-season tournament in our sophomore year. You killed it out there. I remember being amazed at how you played. Then I saw clips of the state championship game this year. Man, you glide up and down the court like you’re flying. You’ve got sick handles and always know what the next best move is. Your eyes are all over the court, knowing where everyone is, setting up your team for success. It’s amazing. You’re a great player, Jay.”

“*Was* a great player. That’s all down the drain. I suck now, man.”

“You do not suck. I wish you could see that.” Brian shook Jayden’s shoulders and let out a sigh. “Don’t let him take it.”

“Take what?”

“All that God-given talent. You’ve got this talent that very few people do, but you’re letting River get in there.” He tapped Jayden’s head. “He’s snuffing it out of you. He knows you have what it takes to take this team from him. He’s just scared of what you bring to the table.”

“He doesn’t look scared out there... and I thought I had what it takes to make it on this team, but who am I kidding? I don’t have anything to bring to the table, not anymore. Like you said, this isn’t high school. This is the NCAA ball, and my small-town golden boy status means nothing here.” Jayden was up again, yanking his bag off the floor.

“Jayden—”

“I’m out of here, man. I’ve got a study session soon. See you back at the dorm.” Jayden swung his bag over his shoulder and left the locker room, shoving the doors open hard.



The next morning, Jayden stared down in disbelief at the graded test Professor Anderson had just handed back to him from last week. Looking up at the professor, there was disappointment in her eyes. Jayden could do better. The professor continued passing out the rest of the papers, and Jayden looked down again. *How have I failed twice in one day?*

Next to him, Kory beamed with pride. “Yoooo, a 76! I think this is the first time I’ve passed a math test on the first try!” Kory’s smile only grew wider. “Thanks, man, for helping me study. I couldn’t have done it without you!” He slapped Jayden on the back before asking, “What’d you get?”

Jayden tried to hide the grade, but his reflexes were too slow. Jayden didn't want to meet Kory's eyes, knowing that'd he'd seen his grade, but he had to. Jayden looked up and was met with a look of shock and confusion.

"You got a 43?"

Jayden tried to shrug it off. "Yeah. No big deal." His voice cracked, betraying the lie he was trying to convince himself of. *Keep it together.*

Kory wasn't convinced. "You know this stuff like the back of your hand. Don't pretend like this isn't a big deal." Kory kept staring. Jayden knew he was trying to determine what was going on in his mind, but Jayden refused to offer even a flicker of clarity. "What happened, Jay?"

"I don't know, man. Nothing, really. Just an off day, I guess." He shrugged again, but Jayden knew exactly what had happened. The test was after another rough practice with River and Coach. When Jayden walked into class the next day to take his first math test of the semester, he was distracted, spending the majority of the class staring at the wall, scribbling down an answer here and there. As hard as he tried, he couldn't focus on the paper in front of him. The only thing running through his mind was worry about what that day's practice would look like, hoping it went better than the last. When he handed in his test, he knew he hadn't done well, but he hadn't thought it would be this bad. He had never failed a test in his life, especially math.

Jayden averted his eyes from Kory, not wanting him to realize how dejected he felt. All the pieces that had fit so perfectly together for him back home were falling to the wayside one by one, and Jayden didn't know how to stop them. *I need to get out of here.* The professor had already dismissed the class; only a few students still lingered, packing up their belongings.

Kory spoke again. "Jay...this is not like you."

Jayden started at this. “How would you know?” he demanded loudly. “We’ve been friends for like 4 weeks. You don’t know anything!” The words were out of his mouth before it was too late. He tried to ignore the stares of people turning in his direction. He looked down, wishing he could take back his words. *Great job keeping it together.*

Kory flinched at Jayden’s sudden outburst. “Four weeks or not, I know this wasn’t just an off day.” Kory maintained eye contact, refusing to let Jayden hide from him. “Even on your off days, you’re twice the student I’ll ever be. What’s going on, man?”

Jayden started packing up. Kory wasn’t far off, but Jayden didn’t want to get into this right now. *Just pack up and get out.* Jayden knew that if he opened this can of worms, he’d expose his weakness, and he couldn’t do that. Nothing had ever been a challenge for Jayden. He got good grades, he dominated on the court, and he gave everyone something to aspire to. Everyone came to Jayden when they needed help. Jayden looked at Kory to find that worry had overshadowed his features. Jayden couldn’t have people worrying about him or thinking that he wasn’t okay. Jayden couldn’t fall apart, couldn’t be the one who needed help. He always had it all together, and he was determined to keep it that way. *Put on a brave face.*

“Dude. Talk to me.” Kory tried again.

“Look, Kory. I told you. I’m fine. I had an off day, but I’ll bounce back. Easy.” He slung his bag over his shoulder, looking down to the end of the aisle and his escape.

“I know you’re not telling me the whole—”

“Yes, I am.” Jayden’s voice was firm, hard. “It’s fine. I messed up, but I’ll fix it. Everything is fine, so just drop it!” They normally walked out together after each class, but Jayden couldn’t stand here another minute. “I’ll see ya,” Jayden mumbled before walking down the row and out of the classroom.

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