

just  
remember.

NEVER



NEVER  
part three

*#1 New York Times Bestselling Author*

Colleen Hoover

*New York Times Bestselling Author*

Tarryn Fisher



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*For Jo Popper.*



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The first thing I notice is the pounding in my chest. It's so fast it's painful. Why would a heart need to pound this hard? I breathe deeply through my nose and open my eyes on the exhale.

Then I throw myself back.

Luckily, I'm on a bed and I tumble onto a mattress. I roll away from the man staring intently at me, and land on my feet. I squint at him while backing up. He's watching me, but he hasn't moved. This eases the pounding in my chest a little. *A little.*

He's young. Not quite a man, maybe late teens or early twenties. I have the urge to run. A door...I need to find a door, but if I take my eyes off him, he may...

"Who the hell are you?" I ask. It doesn't matter who he is. I just need to distract him while I find a way out of here.

He's quiet for a moment as he sizes me up. "I was about to ask you the same thing," he says.

His voice makes me stop shuffling sideways for a few seconds. It's deep... calm. Deeply calm. Maybe I'm overreacting. I make to answer him—which would be the reasonable thing to do when someone asks you who you are—but I can't.

"I asked you first," I say. Why does my own voice sound so unfamiliar? I raise a hand to my throat and wrap it around my neck.

"I..." he hesitates. "I don't know?"

"You don't know?" I say in disbelief. "How could you not know?"

I spot the door and edge closer, keeping my eyes on him. He's on his knees on the bed, but he looks tall. His shoulders are wide and pull against the t-shirt he's wearing. If he comes at me, I doubt I'd be able to fight him off. My wrists look small. *Look small? Why don't I know that my wrists are small?*

This is it. I have to do it.

I dart for the door. It's only a few feet away; if I can get it open I can run for help. I scream as I run. It's bloodcurdling, a real ear sore. My hand wraps around the knob and I look back to see where he is.

He's in the same spot, his eyebrows raised. "Why are you screaming?"

I stop. "Why...why aren't you coming after me?" I'm right in front of the door. Technically I can open the door and run out of here before he's even off the bed. He knows that, and *I* know that, so why isn't he trying to stop me?

He passes a hand over his face and shakes his head, sighing deeply. "What's your name?" he asks.

I open my mouth to tell him it's none of his business, and then realize that, I don't know. I don't know what my freaking name is.

In that case... "Delilah."

"*Delilah...*?" he asks.

It's pretty dark, but I swear he's smiling. "Yeah...is that not good enough for you?"

He shakes his head. "Delilah's a great name," he says. "Listen...*Delilah*. I don't know exactly what we're doing here, but right behind your head there's a piece of paper stuck to the door. Can you pull that off and read it?"

I'm afraid that if I turn around he'll attack me. I reach a hand back without looking and feel around. I pull the piece of paper off the door and bring it in front of my face.

*Charlie! Don't open this door yet! That guy in the room with you...  
you can trust him. Walk back to the bed and read all the notes.  
They'll explain everything.*

"I think it's for you," I tell him. "Is your name Charlie?" I look back up at the guy on the bed. He's reading something too. He looks up and holds a small white rectangle toward me.

"Look at it," he says.

I take a step forward, and then another, and then another. It's a driver's license. I study the picture and then his face. Same person.

"If your name is Silas, who is Charlie?"

"*You are,*" he says.

“I am?”

“Yes.”

He bends to pick up a piece of notebook paper from the bed. “It says so right here.” He holds the paper out to me and I hand him back his driver’s license.

“Charlie isn’t a girl’s name,” I say. I start to read what’s written on the pages and everything else falls away. I drop heavily to the edge of the bed and sit down.

“What the hell?”

The Silas guy is reading too. His eyes trace over the paper he holds in front of his face. I sneak looks at him while he’s reading, and when I do, my heart beats a little bit faster.

I read more. I grow more and more confused. The notes are supposedly from me and this guy, but nothing makes any sense. As I’m reading, I grab a nearby pen and copy the paper I found on the door, to see if I really *did* write it myself.

The handwriting is a perfect match.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” I say. “This is nuts!” I put the page down and shake my head. How can any of this be true? It’s like reading a novel. Lost memories, fathers who betrayed their families, voodoo. *My god*. Suddenly I feel like I want to barf.

Why can’t I remember who I am? What I did yesterday? If what these notes say are true...

I’m about to voice this when Silas hands me another sheet of paper.

*You only have 48 hours. Do not focus on why you can’t remember things or how weird it all feels. Focus on figuring this out before you forget again.*

~Charlie

It’s my handwriting again. “I’m convincing,” I say.

He nods.

“So...where are we?” I turn around in a full circle, noticing the freshly eaten food on the table. Silas points to one of those little paper tents on the nightstand. A hotel. In New Orleans. *Great*.

I’m walking toward the window to take a peek outside when there’s a knock at the hotel door. We both freeze and look in that direction.

“Who is it?” Silas yells at the door.

“It’s *me*!” A voice replies.

Silas motions for me to go stand on the other side of the room, away from the door. I don’t.



I've only known myself for a few minutes, but I can tell I'm stubborn.

Silas unlatches the deadbolt and pulls the door open just a little. A scruffy brown head bobs around the door.

"Hey," the boy says. "I'm back. 11:30 sharp, just like you said."

He has his hands stuffed in his pockets and his face is red like he's been running. I look from him to Silas, and back to him. They look alike.

"You know each other?" I ask.

The younger, lookalike version of Silas nods his head. "We're brothers." He says this loudly while pointing first to Silas and then himself. "I am your brother," he says again, looking at Silas.

"So you said," Silas says with a slight grin on his face. He glances at me, then back at Landon. "Mind if I take a look at your ID?"

The boy rolls his eyes but pulls a wallet out of his back pocket.

"I like that cool, rolling your eyes thing you have going on," Silas says as he opens the boy's wallet.

"What's your name?" I ask him.

He tilts his head, narrowing his eyes at me. "I'm *Landon*," he tells me, as if I should know this. "The better-looking Nash brother."

I smile weakly as Silas looks over Landon's ID. He's a good kid. You can tell by his eyes.

"So," I say, looking at Silas. "You don't know who you are, either? And we're trying to figure this all out together? And every forty-eight hours we forget again?"

"Yeah," he says. "Sounds about right."

This feels like a dream. Not reality.

And then it hits me. *I'm dreaming*. I burst into laughter, just as Landon hands me a sack. I think my laughter caught him by surprise.

"What's this?" I ask, opening the sack.

"You asked me to bring you a change of clothes."

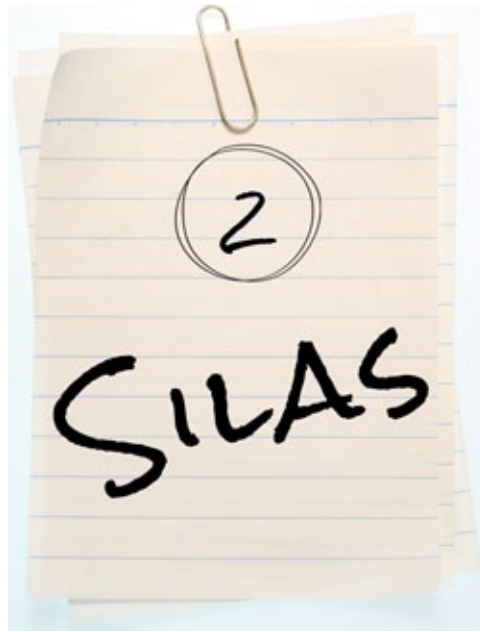
I look down at the gown I'm wearing, and then at the clothes. "Why am I wearing this?"

He shrugs. "That's what you were wearing last night when Silas found you."

Silas pushes open the bathroom door for me. The clothes have tags on them, so I pull them off and begin to change. A cute black top with long sleeves and jeans that fit like they were made for me. *Who gets new clothes in their dreams?*

"I love this dream!" I yell through the bathroom door.

When I'm finished changing, I swing open the door and clap my hands together. "All right, boys. Let's go. Where to?"



I make a quick check of the hotel room as Charlie and Landon file out. I grab the empty trash sack out of the small can under the desk and shove all of our notes into it. When I'm certain I have everything, I follow Charlie and Landon outside.

Charlie is still smiling when we reach the car. She honestly thinks this is a dream, and I don't have the heart to tell her it isn't. It's not a dream. It's actually a nightmare and we've been living it for more than a week now.

Landon climbs inside the car, but Charlie waits for me by the back door. "You want to ride in the front with your *brother*?" she asks, forming air quotes with her fingers.

I shake my head and reach around her to open the door. "No, you can ride in the front." She begins to turn when I grab her arm. I lean down to her ear and whisper. "You aren't dreaming, Charlie. This is real. Something is happening to us and you need to take it seriously so we can figure it out, okay?"

When I pull back, her eyes are wide. The smile is gone from her face and she doesn't nod. She just gets in the car and closes the door.

I claim my spot in the back seat and pull my phone out of my pocket. There's a reminder set on it, so I open it.

*Go to the police station first. Get the backpack and read every note and journal entry you can...as fast as you can.*

I close out the reminder, knowing I'll get about five more reminders in the next two hours. I know this...because I remember setting every single one of

them last night.

I remember writing all the notes in this small hotel trash bag that I have clutched tightly in my hand.

I remember grabbing hold of Charlie's face right before the clock struck 11:00a.m.

I remember whispering *never never* to her, right before I kissed her.

And I remember ten seconds after our lips touched...she pulled back and had no idea who I was. She had no memory of the last forty-eight hours.

Yet...I remembered every single minute of the last two days.

I just couldn't tell her the truth. I didn't want to scare her, and making her believe I was in the same situation as her seemed to be the more comforting option.

I don't know why I didn't forget this time, or why she did. I should be relieved that whatever the hell has been going on with us seems to be over for me, but I'm not relieved at all. I'm disappointed. I would rather have lost my memory again with her than to have her be alone in this. At least when we were in it together, we knew it was something we could work out together.

What seemed to be a pattern has now been broken, and I feel like this just makes it even more difficult to figure out. Why was I spared this time? Why was she not? Why do I feel like I can't be honest with her? Have I always shouldered this much guilt?

I still don't know who I am, or who I used to be. I only have the last forty-eight hours to go by, which isn't much. But it's still better than the half hour of memories Charlie has.

I should just be honest with her, but I can't. I don't want this to scare her, and I feel like the only comfort she has right now is knowing she's not alone in this.

Landon keeps glancing back at me, and then looking at her. I know he thinks we've lost our minds. We sort of *did* lose our minds, but not in the way he's thinking.

I like him. I wasn't sure if he'd show up this morning like I asked him to, since he's still doubtful. I like that he doubts us, but his loyalty to me trumps his reasoning. I'm sure very few people have that quality.

We're mostly quiet on the way to the police station, until Charlie turns to Landon and glares at him.

"How do you know we aren't lying to you?" she asks him. "Why would you even humor us unless you have something to do with what's happened to us?" She's more suspicious of him than she is of me.

Landon grips the steering wheel and glances at me in the rearview mirror. "I *don't* know that you both aren't lying. For all I know, you're getting a kick out

of this. Ninety percent of me thinks you two are full of shit and have nothing better to do. Five percent of me thinks maybe you're telling the truth."

"That's only ninety-five percent," I pipe in from the backseat.

"That's because the other five percent of me thinks *I'm* the one who has gone crazy," he says.

Charlie laughs at that.

We pull in to the police station and Landon finds a parking spot. Before he turns off the car, Charlie says, "Just to be clear, what do I need to say? That I'm here for my backpack?"

"I'll go in with you," I tell her. "The note said everyone thought you were missing and that I was suspected in your disappearance. If we go in together, they'll have no reason to pursue anything further."

She gets out of the car, and as we're walking into the police station, she says, "Why don't we just tell them what's going on? That we can't remember anything?"

I pause with my hand on the door. "Because, Charlie. We specifically warned ourselves in the notes *not* to do that. I'd rather trust the versions of ourselves we don't remember than trust people who don't know us at all."

She nods. "Good point," she says. She pauses and cocks her head to the side. "I wonder if you're smart."

Her comment makes me chuckle.

There's no one in the lobby area when we walk in. I approach a glass window. There's no one behind the desk, but there's a speaker, so I press the button next to it, hearing it crackle to life.

"Hello?" I ask. "Anyone here?"

"Coming!" I hear a woman yell. A few seconds later, she appears behind the desk. Her eyes grow alarmed when she sees Charlie and me.

"Charlie?" she asks.

Charlie nods, wringing her hands together nervously. "Yeah," she says. "I'm here for my stuff. A backpack?"

The woman stares at Charlie for a few seconds and her eyes drop to Charlie's hands. The way Charlie is standing makes her look nervous...like she's hiding something. The woman tells us she'll go see what she can do, and she disappears around the desk again.

"Try to relax," I whisper to Charlie. "Don't make it look like I forced you to do this. They're already suspicious of me."

Charlie folds her hands over her chest, nods, and then brings her thumb to her mouth. She begins to bite the pad of it. "I don't know how to look relaxed," she says. "I'm *not* relaxed. I'm confused as hell."

The woman doesn't return, but a door to our left opens and a uniformed officer appears in the doorway. He looks over at Charlie and then me. He motions for us to follow him.

He walks into an office and proceeds to sit behind his desk. He nods at the two chairs opposite him, so we both take a seat. He doesn't look at all pleased when he leans forward and clears his throat.

"Do you realize how many people we have looking for you right now, young lady?"

Charlie stiffens. I can feel the confusion roll off of her. I know she's still trying to grasp what's happened in the last hour, so I answer for her.

"We're really sorry," I say to him. His eyes remain on Charlie for a few seconds, and then slide to me. "We got in a fight. She decided to disappear for a few days to process everything. She didn't know anyone would be looking for her, or that she would be reported missing."

The officer looks bored with me. "I appreciate your ability to answer for your girlfriend, but I'd really like to hear what Ms. Wynwood has to say." He stands, towering over us, and motions toward the door. "Wait outside, Mr. Nash. I'd like to speak to her alone."

*Shit.*

I don't want to leave her alone with him. I hesitate, but Charlie places a reassuring hand on my arm. "It's fine. Wait outside," she says. I look at her closely, but she seems confident. I stand up a little too forcefully and the chair makes an awful screeching sound as it scoots backward. I don't look at the officer again. I walk out, close his door behind me, and begin pacing the empty lobby.

Charlie emerges a few minutes later with a backpack slung over her shoulder and a smug grin on her face. I smile back at her, knowing I never should have doubted that her nerves would get the best of her. This is the fourth time she's started from scratch, and she seems to have made it through the first few times okay. This time shouldn't be any different.

She doesn't sit in the front seat this time. When we approach the car, she says, "Let's both sit in the back so we can go through all this stuff."

Landon is already annoyed that he thinks we've carried out what he thinks is a prank for so long, and now we're forcing him to chauffeur us around.

"Where to now?" Landon asks.

"Just drive us around until we figure out where we want to go next," I say.

Charlie unzips the backpack and begins rifling through it. "I think we should go to the prison," she says. "My father might have some sort of explanation."

"Again?" Landon asks. "Silas and I tried that yesterday. They wouldn't let us

speak to him.”

“But I’m his daughter,” she says. She glances over at me as if she’s silently asking for my approval.

“I agree with Charlie,” I say. “Let’s go see her father.”

Landon sighs heavily. “I can’t wait until this is over,” he says, making a sharp right out of the driveway of the police station. “Ridiculous,” he mutters. He reaches for the radio and turns up the volume, drowning us out.

We begin pulling items out of the backpack. There are two separate stacks I remember making a couple of days ago when I first began going through these items. One of them is useful to us, one is not. I hand Charlie the journals and I begin sorting through letters, hoping she doesn’t notice I’m skipping some of the ones I know I’ve already read.

“All these journals are full,” she says, flipping through them. “If I wrote this much and this often, wouldn’t I have one that’s current? I can’t find one from this year.”

She makes a good point. When I was in her attic taking all of this stuff, I didn’t notice anything that looked like she was actively using it. I shrug. “Maybe we missed it when we grabbed all of these.”

She leans forward and talks over the music. “I want to go to my house,” she says to Landon. She falls back against the seat, clutching the backpack to her chest. She doesn’t continue going through the letters or journals. She just quietly stares out the window while we approach her neighborhood.

When we arrive at her house, she hesitates before opening the car door. “This is where I live?” she asks.

I’m sure she wasn’t expecting this, yet I can’t reassure her or warn her about what she’ll find inside because she still believes I lost my memories, too.

“Do you want me to go inside with you?”

She shakes her head. “That’s probably not a good idea. Our notes said you should stay away from my mother.”

“True,” I say. “Well, the notes said we found all this stuff in your attic. Maybe check your bedroom this time. If you had a journal you actively wrote in, it’s probably near where you sleep.”

She nods and then exits the car and begins walking toward her house. I watch until she disappears inside.

I can see Landon watching me suspiciously in the rearview mirror. I avoid eye contact with him. I know he already doesn’t believe us, but if he finds out I have any memory of the last forty-eight hours, he’ll *definitely* think I’m lying. And then he’ll stop helping us.

I find a letter I haven’t read yet and begin to open it when the back door



opens. Charlie tosses a box inside the car and I'm relieved to see she found more stuff, including another journal. She slides into the car when the front door opens. I glance in the front seat to see Janette joining the party.

Charlie leans over until our shoulders are touching. "I think she's my sister," she whispers. "She doesn't seem to like me very much."

Janette's car door slams shut and she immediately turns around in her seat and glares at me. "Thanks for letting me know my sister is alive, asshole." She faces the front again and I catch Charlie suppressing a laugh.

"Are you serious?" Landon says, staring across the front seat at Janette. He doesn't seem at all pleased that Janette is tagging along.

She rolls her head and groans. "Oh, come on," she says to Landon. "It's been a year since we broke up. It's not going to kill you to sit in the same car with me. Besides, I'm not staying home all day with Loco Laura."

"Holy shit," Charlie mutters. She leans forward. "You two used to date?"

Landon nods. "Yeah. But it was a loooong time ago. And it lasted like a week." He throws the car in reverse and begins backing out.

"Two weeks," Janette specifies.

Charlie looks at me and raises an eyebrow. "And the plot thickens..." she says.

I personally think Janette's presence will be more intrusive than helpful. At least Landon knows what's going on with us. Janette doesn't seem like she would take something like this very well.

She pulls a tube of lip-gloss out of her purse and begins applying it in the passenger mirror. "So where are we going?"

"To see Brett," Charlie replies nonchalantly as she rifles through the box in the backseat.

Janette spins around in her seat. "Brett? As in *Dad*? We're going to see *Dad*?"

Charlie nods as she pulls out her journal. "Yes," she says. She looks up at Janette. "If you have a problem with that, we can take you back home."

Janette clamps her mouth shut and slowly turns back around. "I don't have a problem with it," she says. "But I'm not getting out of the car. I don't want to see him."

Charlie raises an eyebrow at me and then settles back in her seat, opening the journal. A folded letter falls out and she begins to open that one first. She inhales a breath and then looks at me and says, "Well. Here we go, *Silas Baby*. Let's get to know each other." She opens the letter and begins to read.

I open a letter I've yet to read and settle into my seat as well. "Here we go,

*Charlie Baby.”*



*Charlie Baby,*

*My mom saw my tattoo. I thought I'd be able to hide it for a couple of years, but dammit if I wasn't taking off the bandage this morning when she walked into my room without knocking.*

*She hasn't walked into my room without knocking in three years! I think she assumed I wasn't home. You should have seen her face when she realized what I had done. The tattoo alone was bad enough. I can't imagine what would have happened had she realized it was a representation of you.*

*Thank you for that, by the way. Hidden meanings of our names was a much better suggestion than actually tattooing each other's names. I told her the strand of pearls was a symbol of the pearly gates of heaven, or some shit like that. After that explanation, she couldn't argue much, being as though she's in Church every time the doors are open.*

*She wanted to know who did my tattoo since I'm only sixteen, but I refused to tell her. I'm surprised she didn't guess because I'm pretty sure it was just last month that I mentioned Andrew's older brother was a tattoo artist.*

*Anyway. She was upset, but I swore to her I wouldn't get another*

*one. She told me to make sure I never take off my shirt in front of Dad.*

*I'm still a little shocked we both went through with it. I was half-kidding when I said we should do it, but when you seemed excited, I realized how serious I was. I know people say to never get a tattoo in honor of someone you're in a relationship with, and I know we're only sixteen, but I just don't see anything ever happening in this life that could make me not want you all over my skin.*

*I'll never love anyone like I love you. And if the worst is to ever happen and we do grow apart, I'll never regret this tattoo. You've been a huge part of my life for the sixteen years I've been alive, and whether we end up together in the end or not, I want to remember this part of my life. And maybe these tattoos were more of a commemorative thing than an assumption that we'll spend the rest of our lives together. Either way, I'd hope that fifteen years from now, we will look at these tattoos and be grateful for this chapter in our lives, and there won't be an ounce of regret. Whether we're together or not.*

*I will say, I think you're much tougher than me. I was expecting to have to be the one to calm you down and reassure you that the pain was only temporary, but it turned out to be the other way around. Maybe mine hurt more than yours. ;)*

*Okay, it's late. I'm about to call you and tell you goodnight, but true to form, I had to get all my thoughts out to you in a letter first. I know I've said it before, but I love that we still write letters to each other. Texts get deleted and conversations fade, but I swear I'll have every single letter you've ever written me until the day I die.  
#SnailMailForever*

*I love you. Enough to camouflage you into my skin.*

*Never stop. Never forget.*

*~Silas*

I glance across the seat at Silas, but he's engrossed in his own reading. I

would like to see this tattoo in person, but I don't feel comfortable enough yet to ask him to take off his shirt.

I flip through more letters until I find one I've written to him. I'm curious to see if I'm half as in love as he seems to be.

*Silas,*

*I can't stop thinking about the other night when we kissed. Or your letter explaining how you felt about it.*

*I'd never kissed anyone before. I didn't close my eyes. I was too scared. In movies they close their eyes, but I couldn't make myself do it. I wanted to know if your eyes were closed, and what your lips looked like when they pressed against mine. And I wanted to know what time it was so I could always remember the exact moment we had our first kiss (it was 11:00 o'clock, by the way). And you kept your eyes closed the entire time.*

*After I left, I went home and I just stared at the wall for an hour. I could still feel your mouth on mine even if you weren't there anymore. It was crazy and I don't know if that's supposed to happen. And I'm sorry I ignored all your phone calls after that. I didn't mean to worry you, I just needed time. You know that about me. I have to process everything, and I have to do it alone. And you kissing me was something that definitely needed processing. I've wanted this to happen for a long time, but I know our parents are going to think we're crazy. I've heard my mother say people can't really be in love when you're our age, but I don't think that's true. Adults like to pretend that our feelings aren't as big and important as theirs—that we're too young to really know what we want. But I think what we want is similar to what they want. We want to find someone who believes in us. Who will take our side and make us feel less lonely.*

*I'm so scared that something will happen and it will change the fact that you're my best friend. We both know there are a lot of people who call themselves your friends and then don't act like it, but you've never been that way. I'm totally like rambling. I really like you, Silas. Like so much. Maybe more than green apple cotton candy, and the pink NERDS, and even SPRITE! Yeah, you heard me.*

Charlie

It's sweet. I was sweet—a girl falling for a guy for the first time. I wish I could remember what the first kiss felt like. I wonder if we did more than just kiss? I flip through more letters, scanning over each of them. I come to one with a word in it that catches my eye.

*Dear Silas,*

*I've been trying to write this letter for like thirty minutes and I don't know how to say any of it. I guess I just have to find a way, huh? You always say things so well and I'm always the tongue-tied one.*

*I can't stop thinking about what we did the other night. That thing you do with your tongue...it makes me want to pass out just thinking about it. Am I being too honest? Showing my cards? That's what my dad always says to me. "Don't show people all of your cards, Charlie."*

*I don't have any cards that I want to hide from you. I feel like I can trust you with all of my secrets. Silas, I can't wait for you to kiss me like that again. Last night after you left I had all of these irrational, angry feelings toward every girl on the planet. I know that's stupid, but I don't want you to ever do that thing with your tongue to anyone else. I don't feel like I'm a jealous person, but I'm jealous of anyone you've wanted before me. I don't want you to think I'm crazy, Silas, but if you ever look at another girl like you look at me, I'm going to gouge out your eyes with a spoon. I'd also possibly murder her and frame it on you. So, unless you want to be a blind prison mate, I'd suggest you keep your eyes on me. See you at lunch!*

*Love you!*

Charlie

I blush at that one and sneak a glance at Silas. So we've...I've had...  
I stick the note under my leg so he can't read that one. How embarrassing.



Doing that with someone and not remembering it. Especially since he's apparently so good at that thing with his tongue. *What thing?* I sneak another look at him, and this time he's looking at me too. I immediately feel hot all over.

"What? Why do you have that look on your face?"

"*What look?*" I ask, looking away. It's then I realize that I don't know what my face looks like. Am I even nice to look at? I dig through the backpack until I find my wallet. I take out my ID and stare at it. I'm...*okay*. I notice my eyes first, because they look just like Janette's. But I feel like Janette might actually be a little prettier than me. "Do you think we look more like Mom or Dad?" I ask Janette.

She kicks her feet up on the dash and says, "Like Mom, thank God. I would die if I was born as pale as Dad."

I sink into my seat a little with that answer. I was hoping we looked more like our dad, so when I see him in a little while, he'll feel a tiny bit familiar. I pick up the journal, wanting to distract myself from the fact that I remember nothing about the people who gave life to me.

I flip to the very last day I wrote in my diary. It's probably the thing I should have read first, but I wanted some context. There are two entries for this day, so I start with the first one.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 3<sup>RD</sup>.

*Day your dog gets run over*

*Day father goes to prison*

*Day you have to move out of your childhood home and into a dump*

*Day your mother stops looking at you*

*Day your boyfriend punches someone's dad*

*All the shittiest days of my life. I don't even want to talk about it. By next week everyone else will be, though. Everything just keeps getting worse. I am trying so hard to fix things, make them right. Keep my family out of the gutter, even though that's exactly where we're heading. I feel like I'm swimming against this big wave and there's no way to win. People at school are looking at me differently. Silas says it's all in my head, but it's easier for him to believe that. He's the one with the father. His life is still intact. Maybe it's not fair of me to say this, but I get so mad when he tells me everything is*

*going to be all right—because it's not. Clearly it's not. He thinks his father is innocent. I DO NOT! How can I be with someone whose family despises me? My dad isn't around for them to hate so they transferred it all on me. My family made their precious family look bad. My dad is rotting in prison while they walk around and carry on with their lives, like he doesn't even matter. What they did to my family matters and everything is not going to be all right. My dad hates Silas. How can I be with someone who is tied to the person who locked him up? It makes me feel so sick. Despite all of this, it's so hard for me to walk away from him. When I get angry he says all the right things. But I know deep in my heart that this isn't good for either of us. Silas is so stubborn though. Even if I tried to break up with him he wouldn't let me. It's like a challenge to him.*

*I act like I don't care? He acts like he doesn't care.*

*I start cheating on him with his mortal enemy?*

*He starts cheating on me with his mortal enemy's sister.*

*He hears I'm at the diner with friends? He shows up with his friends.*

*We're volatile together. We weren't always like this. It all started when everything came to a head with our fathers. Before that, if anyone would have told me I'd do everything I could to get rid of him one day, I would have laughed in their face. Who would have thought that our lives that fit so perfectly together would—almost overnight—become unrecognizable?*

*Silas and Charlie's lives don't fit together anymore. It's too hard now. It's taking more effort than either of us is capable of.*

*I don't want him to hate me. I just don't want him to love me anymore.*

*So... I've been acting different. It's not that hard to act different, because I actually am different after all of this. But I've been letting him see it instead of hiding it. I'm mean. I didn't know I was capable of being this mean. And I'm distant. And I'm letting him see me flirt with other guys. A few hours ago, he punched Brian's dad when he overheard him tell another customer that I was Brian's girlfriend. I'm not sure we've ever gotten in that big of a fight before. I wanted*

*him to yell at me. I wanted him to see me for what I really am.*

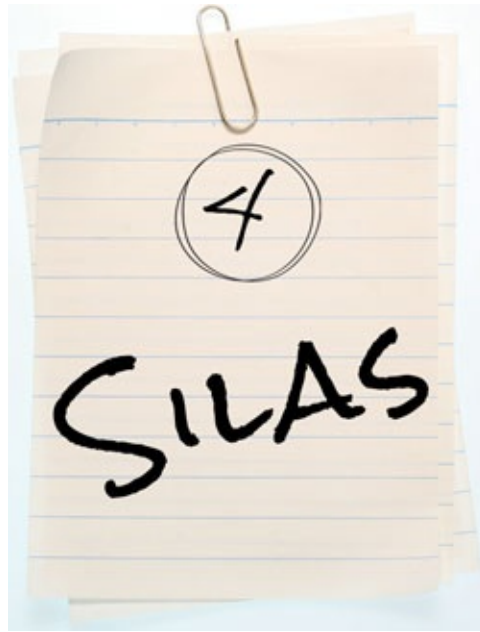
*I wanted him to see that he can do so much better.*

*Instead, right before they threw him out of the diner, he took a step toward me. He bent until his mouth was at my ear and he whispered, "Why, Charlie? Why do you want me to hate you?"*

*My sob caught in my throat as he was pulled away from me. He held my gaze as he was escorted outside. The look in his eye—it was one I've never seen before. It was full of...indifference. As if he finally stopped having hope.*

*And based on the text I just received from him before I began this journal entry...I think he's finally done fighting for us. His text said, I'm on my way to your house. You owe me a proper break-up.*

*He's finally fed up with it all. And we are over. Really over. And I should be glad, because this was my plan all along, but instead I can't stop crying.*



Charlie has been extremely quiet as she reads. She's not taking notes or telling me anything that might be of use to us. At one point, I saw her swipe her hand under her eye, but if it was a tear, she hid it well. It made me curious what she was reading, so I peeked over and tried to read from the journal.

It was our the night we broke up. What happened between us just a matter of a week or so ago. I want nothing more than to scoot over and read the rest of it with her, but instead, she tells Landon she has to pee.

He pulls over at a gas station about an hour from the prison. Janette remains in the car and Charlie sticks by my side as we enter the store. Or maybe it's me who sticks by *her* side. I'm not sure. The desire to protect her hasn't left me at all. If anything, I've become more involved. The fact that I remember everything from the last two—almost three—days has made it harder for me to forget that I'm not supposed to know her. Or love her. But all I can do is think about the kiss from this morning—when we thought we weren't going to remember each other when it was over. The way she allowed me to kiss her and hold her until she wasn't Charlie anymore.

It took all I had not to laugh when she pretended she knew her name. *Delilah*? Even without her memory, she's still the same, stubborn Charlie. It's amazing how a few pieces of her personality still shine through today just as they did last night. I wonder if I'm at all similar to who I was before all this started?

I wait for her until she emerges from the restroom. We walk to the refrigerated cases of drinks and I begin to reach for a water. She grabs at a Pepsi

and I almost catch myself telling her that I know she prefers Coke based on something I read in one of the letters yesterday, but I'm not supposed to remember yesterday. We take our drinks to the register and set them down.

"I wonder if I even *like* Pepsi?" she whispers.

I laugh. "That's why I got water. Playing it safe."

She grabs a bag of potato chips from a display and places them on the counter for the cashier to scan. Then she grabs a bag of Cheetos. Then a bag of Funyuns. Then Doritos. She just keeps piling chips onto the counter. I'm eyeing her when she glances over at me with a shrug. "Just playing it safe," she says.



By the time we return to the car, we're carrying ten different bags of chips and eight different types of sodas. Janette shoots Charlie a look when she sees all the food. "Silas is really hungry," she says to Janette.

Landon is seated behind the wheel, his knee bouncing up and down. He drums his fingers on the steering wheel and says, "Silas, you remember how to drive, right?"

I follow his gaze and see two police cars pulled over on the side of the road in front of us. We'll have to pass them to get out, but I'm not sure why this is making Landon nervous. Charlie is no longer missing, so we have no reason to be paranoid of the police.

"Why can't *you* drive?" I ask him.

He turns around to face me. "I just turned sixteen," he says. "I only have a permit. I haven't applied for my license yet."

"Great," Janette mutters.

In the grand scheme of things, driving without a license isn't really a priority on my list of things to worry about.

"I think we have bigger issues than getting a ticket," Charlie says, voicing my thoughts aloud. "Silas doesn't need to drive. He's helping me sort through all this shit."

"Going through old love letters is hardly important," Janette says. "If Landon gets a ticket with a permit, they'll deny his license."

"Don't get pulled over, then," I say to him. "We still have another two hours to go and a three-hour drive back. I can't waste five hours just because you're worried about your license."

"Why are you two acting so weird?" Janette says. "And why are you reading old love letters?"

Charlie is staring down at the journal when she gives Janette a half-hearted

response. “We’re experiencing an unusual case of amnesia and can’t remember who we are. I don’t even know who *you* are. Turn around and mind your own business.”

Janette rolls her eyes and huffs, then turns around. “Weirdos,” she mutters.

Charlie grins at me and then points down at the journal. “Here,” she says. “I’m about to read the very last entry.”

I move the box that separates us and I scoot closer to her so I can read the last entry with her. “Is it weird? Sharing your journal with me?”

She gives her head a slight shake. “Not really. I kind of feel like we aren’t them.”

### FRIDAY, OCTOBER 3<sup>RD</sup>

*It’s only been fifteen minutes since I last wrote in this journal. As soon as I closed it, Silas texted me and said he was outside. Since my mother doesn’t allow him in our house anymore, I walked outside to hear what he had to say.*

*He caught my breath and I instantly hated myself for it. The way he was leaning against his Land Rover—his feet crossed at the ankles, his hands shoved in his jacket pockets. A shiver ran over me, but I blamed it on the fact that I was in a pajama top with spaghetti straps.*

*He wouldn’t even look up when I walked to his car. I leaned against it next to him and folded my arms over my chest. We stood there for several moments, suspended in silence.*

*“Can I just ask you one question?” he said.*

*He kicked off his car and stood in front of me. I stiffened when his arms came up beside my head and caged me in. He dipped his head a couple of inches until we were eye to eye. The position we were in was nothing new. We’d stood like that a million times before, but this time he wasn’t looking at me like he wanted to kiss me. This time he was looking at me like he was trying to figure out who in the hell I was. He was scrolling over my face like he was looking at a complete stranger.*

*“Charlie,” he said, his voice raspy. He pulled his bottom lip in and bit down on it while he composed what he was about to say next. He sighed and then closed his eyes. “Are you sure this is what you*



want?"

"Yes."

*His eyes popped open at the steadfastness in my response. My heart ached for what he was trying to hide in his expression. The shock. The realization that he wasn't going to talk me out of it.*

*He tapped his fist on the car twice and then shoved himself away from me. I immediately stepped around him, wanting to go inside my house while I still had the strength to let him leave. I kept reminding myself why I was doing this. We aren't a good match. He thinks my father is guilty. Our families hate each other. We're different now.*

*When I reached my front door, Silas said one last thing before getting into his car.*

*"I won't miss you, Charlie."*

*His comment shocked me, so I turned and looked at him.*

*"I'll miss the old you. I'll miss the Charlie I fell in love with. But whoever this is you're turning into..." He waved his hand flippantly up and down my body. "Is not someone I'm going to miss."*

*He climbed inside his car and slammed his door. He backed out of the driveway and peeled away, his tires screeching against the streets of my slum neighborhood.*

*And now he's gone.*

*A small piece of me is angry that he didn't try harder. Most of me is relieved that it's finally over.*

*All this time, he's done everything he can to remember how things used to be between us. He's convinced himself that they can be that way again one day.*

*While he spends all of his time trying to remember...I spend all of my time trying to forget.*

*I don't want to remember how it feels to kiss him.*

*I don't want to remember how it feels to love him.*

*I want to forget Silas Nash, and everything in this world that reminds me of him.*



The prison is not what I expected. And what was I expecting exactly? Something dark and rotting, set across a backdrop of grey skies and barren land? I don't remember what I look like, but I do remember what a prison should look like. I laugh as I climb out of the car and smooth out my clothes. The red brick is bright against the blue sky. There are flowers growing along the grass, dancing a little when the breeze hits them. The only thing ugly about this setting is the barbed wire that runs across the top of the fence.

"This doesn't look so bad," I say.

Silas, who gets out behind me, raises an eyebrow. "You're not the one locked in there."

I feel warmth rise to my cheeks. I may not know who I am, but I do know that was an extremely stupid thing to say. "Yeah," I say. "I guess Charlie is an asshole."

He laughs and grabs my hand before I can protest. I glance back at the car where Janette and Landon are watching us through the side windows. They look like sad little puppies. "You should stay with them," I say. "Teen pregnancy is a thing."

He snickers. "Are you kidding me? Did you not see how they fought the whole way here?"

"Sexual tension," I sing, as I swing open the door to the main reception area.

It smells like sweat. I crinkle my nose as I walk up to the window. A woman stands in front of me, a child tugging on each of her hands. She swears at them before barking her name at the receptionist and passing them her ID.

*Shit.* How old did you even have to be to visit someone in this place? I fumble for my driver's license and wait my turn. Silas squeezes my hand and I turn to smile weakly at him.

"Next," a voice calls. I step up to the window and tell a stern-faced woman who it is I'm here to see.

"Are you on the list?" she asks. I nod. The letters indicated that I had been to visit my father several times since he was incarcerated.

"What about him?" She nods toward Silas who produces his driver's license.

She pushes back his ID and shakes her head. "He ain't on the list."

"Oh," I say. It takes her a few minutes to get everything into the computer, and then she hands me a visitor's badge.

"Leave your bag with your friend," she says. "He can wait out here."

I feel like screaming. I don't want to go in there alone and talk to some man who's supposed to be my father. Silas has his shit together. I want him to come with me.

"I don't know that I can do this," I say. "I don't even know what to ask him." He grabs both of my shoulders and bends his head to look me in the eyes.

"Charlie, based on his manipulative letters, this guy seems like kind of an asshole. Don't buy into his charm. Get answers and get out, okay?"

I nod. "Okay," I say. I look around the dingy waiting area—the yellow walls and painfully-trying-too-hard potted plants. "You'll be waiting out here?"

"Yeah," he says, softly. He's looking in my eyes, a slight grin on his lips. It's making me feel like he wants to kiss me, and it freaks me out. Stranger danger. Except I already know what it feels like to kiss him. I just can't remember.

"If it takes a while, you should go wait at the car with Landon and Janette," I say. "You know...teen pregnancy and shit."

He smiles reassuringly.

"Okay," I say, taking a step back. "See ya on the other side."

I'm trying to look big and bad as I walk through the metal detectors and a guard pats me down. My legs feel shaky. I look back at Silas, who is standing with his hands in his pockets, watching me. He nods his head to urge me forward, and I feel a little surge of bravery.

"I can do this," I say under my breath. "Just a little visit with Daddy-o."

I am taken to a room and told to wait. Twenty odd tables are scattered throughout. The woman who was in front of me in line is sitting at a table with her head in her hands while her kids play in a corner, stacking blocks. I sit as far away from them as possible and stare at the door. Any minute my so-called father is going to walk through those doors, and I don't even know what he looks like. What if I get it wrong? I'm thinking about leaving, just running out and

telling the others that he didn't want to see me, when suddenly he walks in. I know it's him because his eyes immediately find me. He smiles and walks over. *Walks* is not the word to describe what he does. He saunters. I don't stand up.

"Hey, Peanut," he says. He awkwardly hugs me as I sit stiff as a board.

"Hi...Dad."

He slides into the seat across from me, still smiling. I can see how easy it would be to adore him. Even in his prison jumpsuit, he's set apart. It looks all wrong—him being here with his bright white teeth and neatly combed blond hair. Janette was right. We must look just like our mother, because we don't look anything like him. I have his mouth, I think. But not his pale skin tone. I don't have his eyes. When I saw my picture, that's the first thing I noticed. I have sad-looking eyes. He has laughing eyes, though he probably doesn't have anything to laugh about. I'm lured in.

"You haven't been here in two weeks," he says. "I was beginning to think you girls just left me here to rot."

I shrug off the daddy vibes I was getting a minute ago. *Narcissistic prick*. I can already tell how he works and I just met him. He says things with laughing eyes and a grin, but his words lash out like a whip.

"You left us destitute. The car is a problem, so it's hard for me to drive this far. And my mother is an alcoholic. I think I'm mad at you for that, but I don't remember."

He stares at me for a minute, his smile frozen on his face. "I'm sorry you feel that way." He folds his arms across the table and leans forward. He's studying me. It makes me uncomfortable, like maybe he knows more about me than I know myself. Which is probably the case in my current situation.

"I got a phone call this morning," he says, leaning back in his seat.

"Oh yeah? From who?"

He shakes his head. "It doesn't matter who it was from. What matters is what they told me. About you."

I don't offer him any information. I can't tell if he's baiting me.

"Is there anything you want to tell me, Charlize?"

I tilt my head. What kind of game is he playing? "No."

He nods a little and then purses his lips together. His fingers come up in the form of a steeple under his chin while he stares across the table at me. "I was told you were caught trespassing onto someone's property. And that there is reason to believe you're under the influence of drugs."

I take my time before I respond to him. *Trespassing? Who would tell him I*

*was trespassing?* The tarot reader? It was her house I was in. To my knowledge, we didn't tell anyone what had happened. We just went straight to the hotel last night, according to our notes.

So many things run through my mind. I try to sort through them all.

"Why were you on our old property, Charlie?"

My pulse begins to quicken. I stand up. "Is there anything to drink here?" I ask, spinning around in a circle. "I'm thirsty." I spot the soda machine, but I don't have any money on me. Just then, my father shoves his hand into his pocket and pulls out a handful of quarters. He slides them across the table.

"They let you have money here?"

He nods, eyeing me suspiciously the entire time. I grab the change and walk over to the soda machine. I insert the quarters and glance back at him. He's not looking at me. He's staring down at his hands folded together across the table.

I wait for my drink to plummet to the bottom, and even then, I stall another minute while I open it and take a sip. This man makes me nervous and I don't know why. I don't know how Charlie looked up to him like she did. I guess if I had memories of him as my father, maybe I would feel differently about him. But I don't have memories. I can only go by what I'm seeing, and right now I see a criminal. A beady-eyed, pale excuse for a man.

I almost drop my soda. Every muscle in my body weakens with the realization. I think back to a description either me or Silas wrote in our notes. A physical description of *The Shrimp*. Of *Cora*.

*"They call her The Shrimp because she has beady eyes and skin that turns ten shades of pink when she talks."*

Shit. Shit, Shit, Shit.

*Brett is Cora's father?*

He's staring at me now, probably wondering why it's taking so long for me to make my way back to him. I head in his direction. When I reach the table, I eye him hard. Once I'm seated, I lean forward and don't allow a single bit of my trepidation to seep through my confidence.

"Let's play a game," I tell him.

He raises an amused brow. "Okay."

"Let's pretend I've lost my memory. I'm a blank slate. I'm putting things together I may not have seen otherwise, in my prior adoration of you. Are you following...?"

"Not really," he says. He looks sour. I wonder if he gets like this when people don't fall all over themselves to please him.

"Did you happen to father another daughter? I don't know, maybe one with a

crazy mother who would hold me against my will?”

His face turns white. He immediately starts to deny, turns his body away from me, and calls me crazy. But I saw the panic on his face, and I know I’m on to something.

“Did you hear the last part of my sentence or are you just focused on keeping up appearances?” He turns his head to look at me, and this time his eyes are no longer soft. “She kidnapped me,” I say. “Kept me locked in a room in her—*our*—old house.”

His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. I think he’s deciding what to tell me.

“She found you trespassing on her property,” he says finally. “She said you were acting irate. You had no idea where you were. She didn’t want to call the police because she’s convinced you’re doing drugs, so she kept you to help you detox. She had my permission, Charlie. She called me as soon as she found you in her house.”

“I’m not on *drugs*,” I tell him. “And who in their right mind would hold someone against their will?”

“Would you rather she called the police on you? You were talking crazy! And you broke into her house in the middle of the night!”

I don’t know what to believe right now. The only memory of that experience I have is in the notes I wrote to myself.

“And that girl is my half-sister? Cora?”

He stares at the tabletop, unable to meet my eyes. When he doesn’t respond, I decide to play his game. “It’s in your best interest to be honest with me. Silas and I came across a file that Clark Nash has been desperately searching for since before your trial.”

He doesn’t even flinch. His poker face is too perfect. He doesn’t ask me what file I have. He just says, “Yes. She’s your half-sister. I had an affair with her mother years ago.”

It’s like this is all happening to a character on a television show. I wonder how the real Charlie would take this. Burst into tears? Get up and run out? Punch this dude in the face? From what I’ve read of her, probably the latter.

“Wow. Oh, wow. Does my mother know?”

“Yes. She found out after we lost the house.”

What a sorry excuse for a man. First, he cheats on my mother. Impregnates another woman. Then he hides it from his wife and kids until he gets caught?

“God,” I say. “No wonder she’s an alcoholic.” I lean back in my seat and stare up at the ceiling. “You never claimed her? Does the girl know?”

“She knows,” he says.

I feel hot anger. For Charlie, for this poor girl who has to go to school with

Charlie and watch her live the life she didn't get to have, and for this whole screwed up situation.

I take a moment to gather myself while he sits in silence. I wish I could say he was wallowing in guilt, but I'm not so sure this man is capable of feeling guilt.

"Why do they live in the house I grew up in? Did you give it to them?"

This question turns him a light shade of pink. He pops his jaw as his eyes dart left to right. His voice is quieter when he speaks, so that only I can hear him. "That woman was a client of mine, Charlie. And a mistake. I broke it off with her years ago, a month before she found out she was pregnant. We came to an agreement of sorts. That I would be present financially, but nothing else. It was better for everyone that way."

"So what you're saying is, you bought her silence?"

"Charlie..." he says. "I made a mistake. Believe me, I've paid for it tenfold. She used the money I'd been sending her all those years to purchase our old house in auction. She did that just to spite me."

So she's vindictive. And maybe a little bit crazy. And my father is to blame for that?

*Jesus. This just gets worse and worse.*

"Did you do what they say you did?" I ask him. "Since we're telling the truth, I think I have a right to know."

His eyes dart around the room again to see who's listening.

"Why are you asking all of these questions?" he whispers. "This isn't like you."

"I'm seventeen years old. I think I have the right to change." This guy. I want to roll my eyes at him, but first I need him to give me more answers.

"Did Clark Nash put you up to this?" he asks, leaning forward with accusation in both his words and his expression. "Are you involved with Silas again?"

He's trying to turn it around on me. He can't get to me anymore.

"Yes, Daddy," I say, smiling sweetly. "I'm involved with Silas again. And we're in love and very happy. Thank you for asking."

Veins bulge at his temples. His hands tighten into angry fists. "Charlie, you know what I think about that."

His reaction sets me off. I stand up and my chair scoots back with a screech. "Let me tell you what *I* think, Dad." I take a step away from the table and point at him. "You've ruined a lot of lives. You thought money could take the place of your responsibilities. Your choices drove my mother to drinking. You left your own daughters with nothing, not even a role model in their lives. Not to mention



all the people you swindled money from in your company. And you blame everyone else. Because you're a really shitty human. And an even shittier father!" I say. "I don't know Charlie and Janette very well, but I think they deserve better."

I turn and walk away, tossing a couple of final words over my shoulder. "Goodbye, Brett! Have a nice life!"



I'm sitting cross-legged on the hood of the car, leaning against the windshield and writing down notes when she returns. She was in there for more than an hour, so I did what she said and came to wait out here to keep an eye on our siblings. I sit up straight when I see her. I don't ask her if she found out anything; I just wait for her to say something. She doesn't look like she wants to be spoken to at this point.

She's heading straight for the car. She makes brief eye contact with me as she passes me. I turn my head and watch her as she walks swiftly to the rear of the car and then back to the front again. Then to the rear. Back to the front.

Her hands are clenched in fists at her side. Janette opens the front door and steps out of the car.

"What'd the world's greatest prison-dad have to say?"

Charlie stops in her tracks. "Did you know about Cora?"

Janette pulls her neck back and shakes her head. "Cora? Who?"

"The Shrimp!" Charlie says loudly. "Did you know he's her father?"

Janette's mouth drops open and I immediately jump off the hood of the car.

"Wait. *What?*" I say, walking toward Charlie.

She pulls her hands up and rubs them over her face, then makes her fingers into a steeple as she breathes in slowly. "Silas, I think you were right. This isn't a dream."

I can see the fear in every part of her. The fear that hasn't settled in since she lost her memories again several hours ago. It's all just now hitting her.

I take a slow step forward and reach my hand out. "Charlie. It's okay. We'll

figure this out.”

She takes a quick step back and begins shaking her head. “What if we don’t? What if it keeps happening?” She begins pacing again, this time with her hands locked behind her head. “What if it happens over and over until our lives waste away!” Her chest begins to heave in and out with the deep breaths she’s taking.

“What’s wrong with you?” Janette asks. She directs her next question at me. “What am I missing?”

Landon is standing next to me now, so I turn to him. “I’m taking Charlie for a walk. Will you explain to Janette what’s happening to us?”

Landon presses his lips together and nods. “Yeah. But she’ll think we’re all lying.”

I grab Charlie’s arm and urge her to walk with me. Tears begin streaming down her cheeks and she swipes at them angrily. “He was living a double life,” she says. “How could he do that to her?”

“To who?” I ask. “Janette?”

She stops and says, “No, not Janette. Not Charlie. Not my mother. To *Cora*. How could he know he fathered a child and refuse to have anything to do with her? He’s an awful person, Silas! How did Charlie not see that?”

She’s worried about The Shrimp? The girl who assisted in holding her *captive* for an entire day?

“Try to take a breath,” I tell her, grabbing her shoulders and forcing her to face me. “You probably never saw that side of him. He was good to you. You loved him based on the person he pretended to be. And you can’t feel sorry for that girl, Charlie. She helped her mother hold you against your will.”

She begins shaking her head back and forth feverishly. “They never hurt me, Silas. I made it a point to stress that in the letter. She was rude, sure, but I’m the one who broke into their house! I must have followed her there the night I didn’t get in the cab. She thought we were on drugs, because I had no memory of anything, and I don’t blame her! And then I forgot who I was again and I probably started to panic.” She exhales sharply and pauses for a moment. When she looks up at me, she looks calmer. She folds her lips together and moistens them. “I don’t think she had anything to do with what’s happened to us. She’s just a crazy, bitter woman who hates my father and probably wanted some sick revenge for how I treated her daughter. But they got brought into the fold by us. This whole time we’ve been looking at other people...trying to blame other people. But what if...” She exhales a breath, and then, “What if we did this to each *other*?”

I let go of her shoulders and take a step back. She sits down on the curb and

holds her head in her hands. There's no way we would have done this to ourselves on purpose. "I don't think that's possible, Charlie," I say, taking a seat next to her. "How could we do this? How do two people just simultaneously stop remembering at the same time? It has to be something bigger than what we're capable of."

"If it has to be bigger than *us*, then it also has to be bigger than my father. And Cora. And Cora's mother. And my mom. And your parents. If *we* aren't capable of causing this, then no one else should be capable of it either."

I nod. "I know."

She brings her thumb up to her mouth for a second. Then, "So if this isn't happening to us because of other people...what could it be?"

I can feel the muscles in my neck tighten. I bring my hands up behind my head and look up at the sky. "Something bigger?"

"What's bigger? The universe? *God*? Is this the beginning of the apocalypse?" She stands up and paces back and forth in front of me. "Do you think we even believed in God? Before this happened to us?"

"I have no idea. But I've prayed more in the last few days than I probably have in my entire life." I stand up and grab her hand, pulling her in the direction of the car. "I want to know everything your father said. Let's head back and you can write down everything he told you while I drive."

She slides her fingers through mine and walks back to the car with me. When we return, Janette is leaning against the passenger door. She's glaring at both of us. "So you seriously can't remember anything? Either of you?" Her attention is focused solely on Charlie now.

I motion for her and Landon to sit in the backseat this time. I open the driver door as Charlie responds to her. "No. We can't. And I swear I'm not making this up for kicks, Janette. I don't know what kind of sister I've been to you, but I *swear* I wouldn't make this up."

Janette eyes Charlie for a moment and then says, "You've been a really *shitty* sister the last couple of years. But I guess if everything Landon just told me is true and you really can't remember anything, then that explains why not a single one of you dick faces has told me happy birthday today." She opens the door to the back seat, climbs inside, and then slams it.

"Ouch," Charlie says.

"Yeah," I agree. "You forgot your little sister's *birthday*? That's pretty selfish of you, Charlie."

She slaps me playfully in the chest. I grab her hand, and I swear there's a moment that passes between us. A single second where she looks at me like she

can feel what she once felt for me.

But then she blinks, pulls her hand from mine, and climbs in the car.



It's not really my fault that the universe is punishing me. *Us*.  
Silas and me.

I keep forgetting that Silas is screwed too, which probably means I'm a narcissist. *Great*. I think about the sister in the car with me who is having a really shitty birthday. And the half-sister who lives in my old house with her psychotic mother, who, according to my journals, I've been torturing for a decade. I am a bad person, and an even worse sister.

Do I even *want* to get my memories back?

I stare out the window and watch as we pass all of the other stupid cars. I don't have any memories, but I can at least make sure Janette has some of this day.

"Hey, Silas," I say. "Can you put something into that fancy GPS for me?"

"Yeah," he says. "Like what?"

I don't know the girl in the back seat at all. She could be super into role-play video games for all I know. "An arcade," I say.

I see Landon and Janette perk up in the backseat. *Yes!* I congratulate myself. All pubescent humans like video games. It's a thing.

"Kind of a weird time to want to go play games," Silas says. "Don't you think we should—"

"I think we should play games," I interrupt. "Because it's Janette's birthday." I make my eyes really wide so he understands this isn't up for discussion. He makes an "O" face and gives me a really lame thumbs up. Charlie hates thumbs up, I can tell by her body's immediate reaction to it.

Silas finds an arcade not far from where we are. When we get there, he pulls out his wallet and digs around until he finds a credit card.

Janette makes eyes at me, like she's embarrassed, but I shrug. I barely even know this guy. What does it matter that he's spending his money on us? Besides, I don't have any money. My father lost it all and Silas's father still has some, so it's fine. *Not only am I a narcissist; I'm also good at justification.*

We carry our tokens in paper cups, and as soon as we're inside the arcade, Janette and Landon walk off to do their own thing. *Together.* I make eyes at Silas and mouth *see*.

"Come on," Silas says. "Let's get some pizza. Let the kids play."

He winks at me, and I try not to smile.

We find a table to wait for our pizza, and I slide into a booth, wrapping my arms around my knees. "Silas," I say. "What if this keeps happening to us? This endless loop of forgetting. What will we do?"

"I don't know," he says. "Find each other over and over. It's not that bad, right?"

I glance over at him to see if he's joking.

It isn't that bad. But the situation is. "Who wants to spend their life not knowing who they are?"

"I could spend every day getting to know you all over again, Charlie, and I don't think I'd get sick of it."

Heat climbs up my body and I quickly look away. That's my go-to with Silas: *don't look at him, don't look at him, don't look at him.*

"You're dumb," I say. But he's not dumb. He's a romantic and his words are powerful. Charlie isn't, I can tell. But she wants to be—I can tell that too. She desperately wants Silas to show her it's not all a lie. There's a pull inside of her every time she looks at him. It feels like a tugging, and I want to brush it away every time it happens.

I sigh and rip open a sugar packet, emptying the powder onto the table. Being a teenager is exhausting. Silas silently watches me draw patterns in the sugar until he finally grabs my hand.

"We'll figure it out," he assures me. "We're on the right track."

I dust my hands on my pants. "Okay." Even though I know we aren't on any track. We're just as lost as we were when we woke up in the hotel today.

I'm also a liar. *A narcissist, a justifier, a liar.*

Janette and Landon find us just as the pizza arrives. They slide into our booth, rosy cheeked and laughing. In the entire day I've known Janette, I've never even seen her come close to laughter. I hate Charlie's father more right now. For

screwing up a teenage girl. *Two* teenage girls if I count myself. Well...*three*, now that I know about Cora.

I watch Janette bite into her pizza. It doesn't have to be this way. If I could just come out of this...*thing*...I could take care of her. Be better. For both of us.

"Charlie," she says, setting down her slice. "Will you come play with me?"

I smile. "Yeah, of course."

She beams at me and my heart suddenly feels so big and full. When I look over at Silas, he's staring at me, glassy eyed. The corner of his mouth lifts in a small smile.





It's dark when we pull into Charlie and Janette's driveway. There's an awkward moment where I should probably walk Charlie to the door, but based on the way Landon and Janette have been flirting in the back seat, I don't know how all four of us are supposed to do this at the same time.

Janette opens her door, and then Landon opens his, so Charlie and I wait in the car.

"They're exchanging numbers," she says, watching them. "How cute."

We sit in silence watching them flirt until Janette disappears inside the house.

"Our turn," Charlie says, opening her door.

I walk slowly with her up the sidewalk, hoping her mother doesn't see me here. I don't have the energy to deal with that woman tonight. I feel bad that Charlie's about to have to do just that.

She's wringing her hands together nervously. I know she's stalling because she doesn't want me to leave her alone tonight. Every single memory she has consists of me and her. "What time is it?" she asks.

I pull my phone out of my pocket to check. "It's after ten."

She nods and then glances behind her at the house. "I hope my mother is asleep," she says. And then, "Silas..."

I interrupt whatever she's about to say. "Charlie, I don't think we should split up tonight."

Her eyes meet mine again. She looks relieved. I'm the only person she knows, after all. The last thing we probably need right now is to be distracted by people we don't know. "Good. I was just about to suggest that."

I nudge my head to the door behind her. “We need to make it look like you’re home, though. Go inside. Make like you’re going to bed. I’ll go drop Landon off at my house and then come back to get you in an hour.”

She nods. “I’ll meet you at the end of the road,” she says. “Where do you think we should stay tonight?”

I think about that. It’s probably best if we stay at my house, so we can see if there’s anything we missed in my room that might help us. “I’ll sneak you upstairs to my bedroom. We have a lot to go over tonight.”

Charlie’s eyes drop to the ground. “Upstairs?” she says curiously. She inhales a slow breath, and I can hear the air sliding through her clenched teeth. “Silas?” She lifts her eyes to mine, and they’re narrowed. She has an accusatory look about her and I have no idea what I’ve done to provoke this look. “You wouldn’t lie to me, would you?”

I tilt my head, not sure if I heard her right. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve been noticing things. *Little* things,” she says.

I can feel the descent of my heart. *What did I say?* “Charlie...I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

She takes a step back. Her hand covers her mouth for a moment, and then she points at me. “How do you know your bedroom is upstairs when you haven’t even been to your house yet?”

*Shit.* I did say upstairs.

Shaking her head, she adds, “And you made a comment earlier at the prison. About how you’ve prayed a lot in the last few days, but we’re both only supposed to remember *today*. And this morning...when I told you my name was Delilah? I could see you trying not to smile. Because you knew I was lying.” Her voice begins to falter between suspicious and scared. I hold up a reassuring palm, but she backs another step closer to the house.

This is a problem. I’m not sure I know how to respond to her. I don’t like knowing that she would rather run inside a house that terrified her five minutes ago than be standing near me. *Why did I lie to her this morning?*

“Charlie. Please don’t be scared of me.” I can tell it’s already too late.

She darts for her front door, so I lunge forward and wrap my arms around her, pulling her against my chest. She starts to scream, so I cover her mouth with my hand. “Calm down,” I say against her ear. “I won’t hurt you.” The last thing I need is for her not to trust me. She grabs my arm with both hands, trying to free herself from my grasp. “You’re right. Charlie, you’re right. I lied to you. But if you’ll calm down for two seconds, I’ll explain why.”

She lifts a leg while I’m still holding on to her from behind. She presses her

foot against the house and kicks as hard as she can, sending both of us tumbling backward. I lose my grip on her and she begins to crawl away from me, but I'm able to grab her again and push her onto her back. She's looking up at me wide-eyed, but she isn't screaming this time. My hands are pressing her arms against the ground.

"Stop it," I tell her.

"Why did you lie?" she cries. "Why are you pretending this happened to you too?" She struggles some more, so I tighten my hold.

"I'm not pretending, Charlie! I've been forgetting, just like you have. But it didn't happen to me today. I don't know why. But I can only remember the last two days, that's it. I swear." I look her in the eyes and she holds my stare. She's still mildly struggling, but I can tell she also wants to hear my explanation. "I didn't want you to be afraid of me this morning, so I pretended it happened again. But I swear, up until this morning, it's been happening to both of us."

She stops struggling and just lets her head fall to the side. She closes her eyes, completely exhausted. Emotionally *and* physically. "Why is this happening," she whispers in defeat.

"I don't know, Charlie," I say, releasing one of her arms. "I don't know." I brush her hair out of her face. "I'm about to let go of you. I'm going to stand up and get in my car. After I drop Landon off, I'll come back for you, okay?"

She nods her head but doesn't open her eyes. I release her other arm and slowly stand up. When I'm no longer pinning her to the ground, she quickly sits up and scoots away from me before standing up.

"I was lying to protect you. *Not* to hurt you. You believe me, right?"

She rubs the spots on her arms where I was holding her down. She produces a meek, "Yeah." And then, after clearing her throat, "Be back in an hour. And don't lie to me ever again."

I wait for her to walk back inside her house before I head back to the car.

"What the hell was that all about?" Landon asks.

"Nothing," I reply, staring out the window as we pass her house. "Just telling her goodnight." I reach into the back seat to grab all of our things. "I'm going back to Jamais Jamais for my Land Rover."

Landon laughs. "We sort of wrecked it last night. Tearing down a gate?"

I remember. I was there. "It might still drive okay, though. It's worth a shot, and I can't keep using...whose car is this, anyway?"

"Mom's," he says. "I texted her this morning and told her yours was in the shop and that we needed hers today."

I knew I liked this kid.

"So...Janette, huh?" I ask him.

He turns toward the window. "Shut up."

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The Land Rover's front end was a debacle of twisted metal and debris. But apparently the damage was only cosmetic, because it cranked right up.

It took all I had not to go inside the gate again and scream at that psycho woman for leading us in the wrong direction, but I didn't. Charlie's dad has caused enough of a shit storm in her world.

I calmly drive my car to Charlie's house and wait for her at the end of the road like I said I would. I text her to let her know I'm in a different vehicle.

I begin to turn theories over in my mind while I wait for her. It's hard for me to suspend belief in order to give our circumstances an explanation, but the only things I can come up with are otherworldly.

*A curse.*

*An alien abduction.*

*Time travel.*

*Twin brain tumors?*

None of it makes sense.

I'm making notes when the passenger door opens. A rush of wind follows Charlie inside the car, and I find myself wishing it would push her all the way to my side. Her hair is damp and she's in different clothes.

"Hey."

She says, "Hi," and pulls the seatbelt into place. "What were you writing?"

I hand her the notebook and pen and then back out of the driveway. She begins reading over my summary.

When she's finished, she says, "None of it makes sense, Silas. We got into a fight and broke up the night before this started. The next day we can't remember anything other than random stuff, like books and photography. It keeps happening for a week, until you *don't* lose your memory and I *do*." She pulls her feet up on the seat and taps the pen against the notebook. "What are we missing? There has to be something. I have no memory before this morning, so what happened yesterday that made you *stop* forgetting? Did anything happen last night?"

I don't answer her right away. I think about her questions. How all along, we've been assuming other people had something to do with this. We thought The Shrimp was involved, we thought her mother was involved. For a while, I wanted to accuse Charlie's father. But maybe it's none of that. Maybe it has nothing to do with anyone else and everything to do with us.

We reach my house no closer to the truth than we were this morning. Than we were two days ago. Than we were last week.

“Let’s go through the back door in case my parents are awake.” The last thing we need right now is for them to see me sneaking Charlie into my bedroom to stay the night. The back door won’t take us past my father’s study.

It’s unlocked, so I make my way in first. When all is clear, I grab her hand and rush her through the house, up the stairwell, and to my bedroom. By the time I shut the door behind us and lock it, we’re both breathing heavily. She laughs and falls onto my bed. “That was fun,” she says. “I bet we’ve done that before.”

She sits up and brushes the hair out of her eyes, smiling. She begins to look around my room, through eyes that are seeing it again for the first time. I immediately get that longing in my chest, akin to how I felt last night at the hotel when she fell asleep in my arms. The feeling that I would do absolutely anything to be able to remember what it was like to love her. *God, I want that back.* Why did we ever break up? Why did we let everything that happened between our families come between us? From the outside looking in, I’d almost believe we were soul mates before we let it all fall apart. *Why did we think we could intervene with fate?*

I pause.

When she looks at me, she knows something is going on in my head. She scoots to the edge of the bed and tilts her head. “Do you remember something?”

I sit in the desk chair and roll toward her. I take both of her hands in mine and I squeeze them. “No,” I say. “But...I might have a theory.”

She sits up straighter. “What *kind* of theory?”

I’m sure this is about to sound crazier coming from my mouth than it does swimming around in my head. “Okay, so...this might sound stupid. But last night...when we were at the hotel?”

She nods, encouraging me to continue.

“One of the last thoughts I had before we fell asleep was how—while you were missing—I didn’t feel whole. But when I found you, it was the first time I felt like Silas Nash. Up until that point, I didn’t feel like *anyone*. And I remember swearing to myself right before I fell asleep that I would never allow us to drift apart again. So I was thinking...” I release her hands and stand up. I pace the room a couple of times until she stands up, too. I shouldn’t be embarrassed to say this next part out loud, but I am. It’s ridiculous. But so is every other thing in the whole world right now.

I rub the nerves out of the back of my neck while I lock eyes with her. “Charlie? What if...when we broke up...we screwed with destiny?”

I wait for her to laugh, but instead, a rush of chills covers her arms. She makes to rub them away as she slowly takes a seat back down on the bed. "That's ridiculous," she mutters. But there's no conviction in her words, which means maybe a part of her thinks this theory is worth exploring.

I sit down in my chair again and position myself in front of her. "What if we're supposed to be together? And messing with that caused some sort of...I don't know...rift."

She rolls her eyes. "So what you're implying is, the universe wiped away all of our memories because we *broke up*? That seems a little narcissistic."

I shake my head. "I know how it sounds. But yes. Hypothetically speaking... what if soul mates exist? And once they come together, they can't fall apart?"

She folds her hands together in her lap. "How does that explain why you remembered this time and I didn't?"

I pace the room some more. "Let me think for a minute," I say to her.

She waits patiently while I rub the floor raw. I hold up a finger. "Hear me out, okay?"

"I'm listening," she says.

"We've loved each other since we were kids. We obviously had this connection that has lasted our entire lives. Up until external factors started getting in our way. The thing with our fathers, our families hating each other. You holding a grudge against me for believing your father was guilty. There's a pattern here, Charlie." I grab the notebook that I wrote in earlier and look at all the things we naturally remember and all the things we don't. "And our memories...we can remember things that weren't forced on us. Things we had a passion for all on our own. You remember books. I remember how to work a camera. We remember lyrics to our favorite songs. We remember certain things in history, or random stories. But things that were forced on us by others, we forgot. Like football."

"What about people?" she asks. "Why did we forget all the people we've met?"

"If we remembered people, we'd still have *other* memories. We'd remember how we met them, the impact they've had on our lives." I scratch at the back of my head. "I don't know, Charlie. A lot of it doesn't make sense still. But last night, I felt a connection with you again. Like I had loved you for years. And this morning...I didn't lose my memories like you did. There has to be significance in that."

Charlie stands up and begins pacing the room. "*Soul* mates?" she mutters. "This is almost as ridiculous as a curse."

"Or two people developing in-sync amnesia?"

She narrows her eyes at me. I can see her mind working as she chews on the pad of her thumb. “Well then, explain how you fell back in love with me in just two days. And if we’re soul mates, why wouldn’t I have fallen back in love with you?” She stops pacing and waits for my answer.

“You spent a lot of your time locked up inside your old house. I spent all that time looking for you. I was reading our love letters, going through your phone, reading your journals. By the time I found you yesterday, I felt like I already knew you. For me, reading everything from our past somehow connected me to you again...like some of my old feelings had come back. But for you...I was barely more than a stranger.”

We’re both sitting again. Thinking. Contemplating the possibility that this might be the closest we’ve come to any sort of pattern.

“So what you’re suggesting is...we were soul mates. But then external influences ruined us as people and we fell out of love?”

“Yeah. Maybe. I think so.”

“And it’ll keep happening until we set things right again?”

I shrug, because I’m not sure. It’s just a theory. But it makes more sense than anything else we’ve come up with.

Five minutes pass while neither of us says a single word. She finally falls back onto the bed with a heavy sigh and says, “You know what this means?”

“No.”

She pulls up onto her elbows and looks at me. “If this is true...you only have thirty-six hours to make me fall in love with you.”

I don’t know if we’re on to something, or if we’re about to spend the remainder of our time chasing a dead end, but I smile, because I’m willing to sacrifice the next thirty-six hours for this theory. I walk over to the bed and fall onto it beside her. We’re both staring up at the ceiling when I say, “Well, Charlie Baby. We better get started.”

She throws an arm over her eyes and groans. “I don’t know you very well, but I can already tell you’re gonna have fun with this.”

I smile, because she’s right.

“It’s late,” I tell her. “We should try to get some sleep, because your heart is going to get a serious workout tomorrow.”

I set my alarm for 6:00 a.m. so that we can be up and out of the house before anyone else wakes up. Charlie sleeps closest to the wall and is out cold in a matter of minutes. I don’t feel like I’ll be able to fall asleep anytime soon, so I pluck one of her journals from the backpack and decide to read some before I fall asleep.

*Silas is crazy.*

*Like...legit crazy. But my god, I have so much fun with him. He started a game he forces me to play sometimes called Silas Says. It's exactly the same as Simon Says, but...you know. With his name instead of Simon's. Whatever. He's way cooler than Simon.*

*We were on Bourbon Street today and it was so hot and we were both sweating and miserable. We had no idea where our friends had gone off to and we weren't supposed to meet them for another hour. When it comes to me and Silas, I'm always the whiney one, but it was so hot this time, even he was whining a little.*

*Anyway, we walked past this guy who was propped up on a stool and he had painted himself silver, like a robot. There was a sign leaning against his stool that said, "Ask me a question. Get a real answer. Only 25 cents."*

*Silas handed me a quarter, so I dropped it in the bucket. "What's the meaning of life?" I asked the silver man.*

*He made a stiff turn of his head and looked me square in the eye. In a very impressive robot voice, he said, "That depends on the life of which you search for meaning."*

*I rolled my eyes at Silas. Just another hack job scamming the tourists. I clarified my question so that at least the quarter wouldn't go to complete waste. "Fine," I said. "What's the meaning of my life?"*

*He took a rickety step down from his stool and bent at a ninety-degree angle. With his silver robot fingers, he plucked my quarter out of the bucket and placed it in my palm. He glanced at Silas and then to me and smiled. "You, my dear, have already found your meaning. All there is left to do now...is dance."*

*Then the silver dude started dancing. Like...legit dancing. Not even in a robot style. He just had this big, goofy grin on his face and held his hands up like a ballerina and danced like no one was watching him.*

*At that point, Silas grabbed my hands and said in mock-robot voice,*



*“Dance. With. Me.” He tried to pull me into the street to dance with him, but hell no. Embarrassing. I pulled away from him, but he wrapped his arms around me and did that thing where he puts his mouth right on my ear. He knows I freaking love that, so it was really unfair. He whispered, “Silas says dance.”*

*I don’t know what it was about him in that moment. I don’t know if it was because he honestly didn’t care that anyone was watching us, or if it was because he was still talking to me in that silly robot voice. Whatever it was, I’m pretty sure I fell in love with him today.*

*All over again. For like the tenth time.*

*So I did what Silas said. I danced. And you know what? It was fun. So much fun. We danced all around Jackson square and we were still dancing when our friends found us. We were covered in sweat and out of breath, and if I were watching us from the sidewalk, I would probably be the girl crinkling up my nose, muttering “gross” under my breath.*

*But I’m not that girl. I never want to be that girl. For the rest of my life, I want to be the girl dancing with Silas in the street.*

*Because he’s crazy. That’s why I love him.*

I close the journal. *Did that really happen?* I want to read more, but I’m afraid if I keep going, I’ll come across things I don’t want to remember.

I set the journal on my nightstand and roll over so that I can wrap my arm around her. When we wake up tomorrow, we’ll only have one day left. I want her to be able to let go of everything that’s going on between us so that she can genuinely focus on me and our connection and nothing else.

Knowing Charlie...that’s going to be hard. It’ll take some crazy skills to be able to accomplish that.

But luckily...I’m crazy. *That’s why she used to love me.*



“Okay, so how does this work exactly?” I ask as we walk toward his car. “Do we float down the bayou in a rowboat while little critters sing ‘Kiss the Girl’?”

“Don’t be a smartass.” Silas grins. Then he stops me before I reach the car, grabbing my hand and pulling me back. I look up at him in surprise. “Charlize,” he says, looking first at my lips, and then in my eyes. “If you give me half a chance I can make you fall in love with me.”

I clear my throat and try not to look away even though I want to. “Well... you’re off to a good start. So there’s that.”

He laughs. I feel so awkward, I don’t know what to do with myself, so I pretend to sneeze. He doesn’t even say *bless you*. He just smiles at me, like he knows it was a fake sneeze.

“Stop it,” I say. “You’re staring at me.”

“That’s the point, Charlie. *Look into my eyes.*”

I burst into laughter. “You’ve got game, Silas Nash,” I say, walking toward my side of the car.

When we’re both buckled in, Silas turns to me and says, “According to a letter you wrote, the first time we had sex was—”

“No. I don’t want to go there. Where did you find that letter? I thought I hid it.”

“Not well enough.” Silas grins.

I think I like flirty Silas. Even if we forget everything again tomorrow, at least I’ll get one good day out of this. “Let’s go somewhere fun,” I say. “I can’t remember the last time I had fun.”

We both start laughing at the same time. I like him. I really do. He's so easy to be around. He laughs too much, maybe. Like, we're totally screwed right now, and he's still always smiling. Worry a little, dude. He makes me laugh when I should be worrying.

"Okay," he says, glancing at me. "I really would rather go to that place in the letter where I did that thing with my tongue, but..."

It's automatic—it must belong to Charlie—but as soon as the words are out of his mouth, my hand reaches across the space between us and I slap his arm. He grabs my hand before I can pull away and holds it to his chest. This too feels like something that's been done before, something that belongs to them—Charlie and Silas, not me and this guy.

It makes me feel tired to be held against him like this, even if it's just my hand. I can't afford to be tired, so I tug away from him and look out the window.

"You're really fighting this," he says. "That kind of defies the point."

He's right. I reach over and grab his hand. "This is me falling in love with you," I tell him. "Deep, soul love."

"I wonder if you're less ridiculous when you have your memory."

I turn on the radio with my free hand. "Doubt it," I say.

I like making him smile. It doesn't take much to make the corners of his mouth twitch, but to actually get his lips to curve all the way up, I have to be extra sassy. His lips are fully curved now as he pulls into traffic and I am able to watch him without him watching me. We're acting like we know each other even though our conscious minds don't know each other. Why is that?

I reach for the backpack, to search for the answer in their letters or journals.

"Charlize," Silas says. "The answer isn't in there. Just be with me. Don't worry about that."

I drop the backpack. I don't know where he's driving. I don't know if he knows where he's driving, but we end up in a parking lot just as it starts to rain. There are no other cars around and it's coming down too hard for me to see what's in the buildings around us.

"Where are we?"

"I don't know," Silas says. "But we should get out of the car."

"It's raining."

"Yes. Silas says get out of the car."

"Silas says...? Like *Simon* says?"

He just stares at me expectantly, so I shrug. Honestly, what do I have to lose? I open the car door and step into the rain. It's warm rain. I tilt my face up and let it hit me.

I hear his door slam and then he runs around the front of the car and stands in

front of me.

“Silas says run around the car five times.”

“You’re weird, you know that?” He stares at me. I shrug again and start running. It feels good. Like with every step some of the tension is leaving my body.

I don’t look at him when I run past him; I stay focused on not tripping. Maybe Charlie ran track or something. Five car laps later I stop in front of him. We are both soaked through. Drops of water are dangling from his eyelashes and running down his tanned neck. Why do I have the urge to touch my tongue to those lines of water?

*Oh, yeah.* We were in love. Or maybe it’s because he’s freaking hot.

“Silas says go into that store and ask for a hotdog. When they tell you they don’t have hotdogs, stomp your foot really hard and scream like you did in the hotel this morning.”

“What the—”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “Silas says.”

Why the hell am I even doing this? I give Silas the dirtiest look I can and stomp off in the direction of the store he pointed me to. It’s an insurance agency. I swing open the door and three grouchy-looking adults raise their heads to see who has walked in. One of them even has the audacity to scrunch up their nose at me, like I don’t already know I’m dripping water everywhere.

“I’d like a hotdog with everything,” I say.

I’m met with blank stares. “Are you drunk?” the receptionist asks me. “Do you need help? What’s your name?”

I stomp my foot and let out a bloodcurdling scream, at which all three of them drop whatever they’re holding and look at each other.

I take their moment of surprise to run out. Silas is waiting for me outside the door. He’s laughing so hard; he’s bent over at the waist.

I punch him on the arm and then we both run for the Rover.

I can hear my own laughter blending with his. That was fun. We jump into the car and peel away just as Grouchy One, Two, and Three walk outside to watch us.

Silas drives for a few miles before he pulls into another parking lot. This time I can see the glowing sign advertising: THE BEST COFFEE AND BEIGNETS IN LOUISIANA!

“We’re soaking wet,” I say, not seeming to be able to wipe the smile from my face. “Do you know how messy beignets will be?”

“Silas says eat ten beignets,” he says stoically.

“Ugh. Why do you have to act like a robot when you play this game? It’s

creeping me out.”

He doesn’t respond. We get a table near the window and order coffee and two dozen beignets. The waitress doesn’t seem bothered by our wet clothes or the fact Silas is speaking in a robot voice.

“The waitress thinks we’re cute,” I tell Silas.

“We are.”

I roll my eyes. This is fun. *Would Charlie think this was fun?*

When our beignets come, I am so hungry I don’t care about my wet hair or clothes. I dive in, moaning when the warm pastry hits my tongue. Silas watches me in amusement.

“You really like those, huh?”

“They’re actually really gross,” I say. “I’m just really into this game.”

We eat as many as we can until we’re covered in white powder. Before we leave, Silas rubs some of it across my face and hair. Not to be outdone, I return the favor. God, this guy is fun. Maybe I kind of see what Charlie sees in him.



She's into this. She hasn't smiled nearly enough in the last few days I've had with her, but now she can't *stop* smiling.

"Where are we going now?" she says, clapping her hands together. She still has powdered sugar on the corner of her mouth. I reach across the seat and wipe it off with my thumb.

"We're going to The French Quarter," I tell her. "Lots of romantic places there."

She rolls her eyes, scrolling through her phone. "I wonder what we actually used to do for fun. Besides take selfies."

"At least they were all good selfies."

She shoots me a look of pity. "That's a contradiction. There are no such things as *good selfies*."

"I've been through your camera roll. I beg to differ."

She ducks her head and looks out her window, but I can see the pinks of her cheeks grow redder.

---

After we park, I have absolutely no plan. We filled up on so many beignets for breakfast, I'm not sure she's quite ready to have lunch yet.

We spend the first part of the afternoon walking up and down every street, stopping in almost every store. It's as if we're both so fascinated by the scenery, we forget we have a goal today. I'm supposed to make her swoon. She's

supposed to swoon and fall in love with me. *Get back on track, Silas.*

We're on Dauphine Street when we walk past what claims to be a bookstore. Charlie turns around and grabs my hands. "Come on," she says, pulling me into the store. "I'm pretty sure the way to my heart is in here."

There are books stacked floor to ceiling, every which way. Sideways, top to bottom, books used as shelves for more books. A man sits behind a cash register to the right, which is covered in even more books. He nods a greeting as we enter. Charlie heads to the back of the store, which isn't very far away. It's a small store, but there are more books than a man could read in his entire life. She runs her fingers along the books as she passes them, looking up, down, around. She actually twirls when she gets to the end of the aisle. She's definitely in her element, whether she remembers or not.

She's facing a corner, pulling a red book off the shelf. I walk up behind her and give her another *Silas Says* task.

"Silas says...open the book to a random page and read the first few sentences you see..."

She chuckles. "That's easy."

"I wasn't finished," I say. "Silas says read the sentences at the top of your lungs."

She spins around to face me, eyes wide. But then a mischievous grin drags across her mouth. She stands up tall while holding the book out in front of her. "Fine," she says. "You asked for it." She clears her throat, and then, as loud as she can, she reads, "IT MADE ME WANT TO MARRY HER! MADE ME WANT TO BUY HER A MAGIC AIRPLANE AND FLY HER AWAY TO A PLACE WHERE NOTHING BAD COULD EVER HAPPEN! MADE ME WANT TO POUR RUBBER CEMENT ALL OVER MY CHEST AND THEN LAY DOWN ON TOP OF HER SO THAT WE'D BE STUCK TOGETHER, AND SO IT WOULD HURT LIKE HELL IF WE EVER TRIED TO TEAR OURSELVES APART!"

Charlie is laughing when she finishes. But when the words she read begin to register, her laughter fades. She runs her fingers over the sentences like they mean something to her. "That was really sweet," she says. She flips through the pages of the book until she comes to a stop with her finger on a different paragraph. Then, in just barely a whisper, she begins reading again. "*Fate is the magnetic pull of our souls toward the people, places, and things we belong with.*"

She stares at the book for a moment and then closes it. She places it back on the shelf, but she moves two books out of the way so that this book can be

displayed more prominently. “Do you believe that?”

“Which part?”

She leans against a wall of books and stares over my shoulder. “That our souls are pulled toward the people we belong with.”

I reach out to her and pull at a lock of her hair. I run my fingers down it and twirl it around my finger. “I don’t know if I normally believe in soul mates,” I tell her. “But for the next twenty-four hours, I’d bet my life for it to be true.”

She rolls her shoulder until her back is pressed against the wall of books, and she’s facing me. I would *absolutely* bet my life on fate right now. I somehow have more feelings for this girl than will fit inside of me. And I want more than anything for her to feel the same thing. To *want* the same thing. Which...in this very moment...is for my mouth to be on hers.

“Charlie...” I release her lock of hair and bring my hand to her cheek. I touch her gently...tracing her cheekbone with my fingertips. Her breaths are shallow and quick. “Kiss me.”

She leans into my hand a little and her eyes flutter. For a moment, I think she might actually do it. But then a smile steals her heated expression and she says, “Silas didn’t say.” She darts under my arm and disappears down the next aisle. I don’t follow her. I grab the book she read from and tuck it under my arm as I head for the register.

She knows what I’m doing. The whole time I’m at the register, she’s watching me from down the aisle. After I purchase the book, I walk outside and let the door shut behind me. I wait a few seconds to see if she follows me immediately out, but she doesn’t. Same stubborn Charlie.

I pull the backpack off my shoulder and shove the book inside of it. Then I pull out my camera and turn it on.

She stays inside the bookstore for another half hour. I don’t mind it. I know she knows I’m still out here. I take picture after picture, engrossed in the people who pass by and the way the sun is setting over the buildings, casting shadows on even the smallest of things. I take pictures of all of it. When Charlie finally makes it back outside, my battery is almost dead.

She walks up to me and says, “Where’s my book?”

I hoist the backpack over my shoulder. “I didn’t buy that book for you. I bought it for me.”

She huffs and follows after me as I make my way down the street. “That’s not a good move, Silas. You’re supposed to be thoughtful. Not selfish. I want to fall in love with you, not become irritated with you.”

I laugh. “Why do I feel like love and irritation go hand in hand with you?”

“Well, you *have* known me longer than I’ve known myself.” She grabs my



hand to pull me to a stop. “Look! Crawfish!” She yanks me in the direction of the restaurant. “Do we like crawfish? I’m so hungry!”

---

Turns out, we do *not* like crawfish. Luckily, they had chicken strips on the menu. We both like chicken, apparently.

“We should write that down somewhere,” she says, walking backward down the middle of the street. “That we hate crawfish. I don’t want to have to go through that awful experience again.”

“Wait! You’re about to...” Charlie falls on her butt before the rest of the sentence can make it out of my mouth. “Walk into a pothole,” I finish.

I reach down to help her up, but there’s not much I can do about her pants. We had finally dried off after the rain from earlier today, and now she’s soaking wet again. This time from muddy water. “You okay?” I ask, trying not to laugh. *Trying* being the key word here. Because I’m laughing harder than I’ve laughed all day.

“Yeah, yeah,” she says as she attempts to wipe mud from her pants and her hands. I’m still laughing when she narrows her eyes and points down at the mud puddle. “Charlie says sit in the pothole, Silas.”

I shake my head. “No. No way. The game is called *Silas says*, not *Charlie says*.”

She arches an eyebrow. “Oh, really?” She takes a step closer to me and says, “Charlie says sit in the pothole. If Silas does what Charlie says, Charlie will do whatever *Silas says*.”

Is that an invitation of sorts? *I’m liking flirtatious Charlie*. I glance down at the pothole. It’s not *that* deep. I turn around and lower myself until I’m sitting cross-legged in the puddle of muddy water. I keep my eyes on Charlie’s face, not wanting to witness the attention we’re probably attracting from bystanders. She swallows back her laughter, but I can see the pleasure she’s getting out of this.

I stay sitting in the pothole until it even starts to embarrass Charlie. After several seconds, I lean back onto my elbows and cross my legs. Someone snaps a picture of me in the pothole, so she motions for me to stand. “Get up,” she says, glancing around. “Hurry.”

I shake my head. “I can’t. Charlie didn’t say.”

She grabs my hand, laughing. “Charlie says *get up*, you idiot.” She helps me to my feet and grabs my shirt, pressing her face against my chest. “Oh my God, they’re all staring at us.”

I wrap my arms around her and begin to sway back and forth, which is

probably not what she was expecting me to do. She looks up at me, my shirt still clenched in her fists. "Can we go now? Let's go."

I shake my head. "Silas says dance."

Her eyebrows crinkle together. "You can't be serious!"

There are several people stopped on the street now, some of them taking pictures of us. I sort of don't blame them. I'd probably take pictures of an idiot who willingly sat in a mud puddle, too.

I unclench her fists from my shirt and make her hold my hands as I force her to dance to non-existent music. She's stiff at first, but then she seems to let the laughter take over the embarrassment. We sway and dance down Bourbon Street, bumping into people as we go. The whole time, she's giggling like she doesn't have a care in the world.

After a few minutes, we come to a break in the crowd. I stop twirling her long enough to pull her to my chest and sway softly, back and forth. She's looking up at me, shaking her head. "You're crazy, Silas Nash," she says.

I nod. "Good. That's what you love about me."

Her smile fades for a moment and the look she has in her eyes causes me to stop swaying. She places her palm over my heart and stares at the back of her hand. I already know she's not feeling a heartbeat inside my chest. It's more like a drumline in mid procession.

Her eyes meet mine again. She parts her lips and whispers, "Charlie says... kiss Charlie."

I would have kissed her even if Charlie didn't say. My hand wraps in her hair a single second before my lips meet hers. When her mouth parts for mine, it feels as though she punches a hole straight through my chest and makes a fist around my heart. It hurts, it doesn't, it's beautiful, it's terrifying. I want it to last for eternity, but I'll run out of breath if this kiss goes on for just one more minute. My arm wraps around her waist, and when I pull her closer, she moans quietly into my mouth. *Jesus.*

The only thing I have room for in this head of mine right now is the firm belief that fate *absolutely* exists. Fate...soul mates...time travel...you name it. It *all* exists. Because that's what her kiss feels like. *Existence.*

We're momentarily jolted when someone bumps into us. Our mouths separate, but it takes effort to free ourselves from whatever hold just took over. The music from all the open doors along the street comes back into focus. The lights, the people, the laughter. All the external things that ten seconds of her kiss just blocked out are rushing back. The sun is setting, and nighttime seems to transform this entire street from one world to another. I can't think of anything I want more than to get her out of here. Neither of us seems to be able to move,

though, and my arm feels like it weighs twenty pounds when I reach for her hand. She slides her fingers through mine and we begin walking in silence back toward the parking lot where my car is.

Neither of us speaks a word the entire walk back. Once we're both inside my car, I wait a moment before cranking it. Things are too heavy. I don't want to start driving until we get out whatever it is we need to say. Kisses like that can't linger without acknowledgment.

"Now what?" she asks, staring out the window.

I watch her for a moment, but she doesn't move. It's as if she's frozen. Suspended in time between the last kiss and our next one.

I buckle up and put the car in drive. *Now what?* I have no idea. I want to kiss her like that a million more times, but every single kiss would end just like that one did. With the fear that I won't remember it tomorrow.

"We should go back home and get a decent night's sleep," I say. "We also need to make more notes in case..." I cut myself off.

She pulls on her seatbelt. "In case soul mates don't exist..." she finishes.



During our drive to Silas's house, I think about everything we've learned today. I think about my father and how he isn't a good human. Part of me is scared that being a good person is inherent. I've read enough about how I used to be to know that I didn't treat people very well. Silas included.

I can only hope that the person I turned out to be was the result of outside influences, and not because that's who I'll always be. A vindictive, cheating shell of a person.

I open the backpack and begin reading more notes while Silas drives. I come across something about files that Silas stole from his father, and how we suspect they might implicate my father. Why would Silas steal those from his father? If my father is guilty, which I believe he is, why would Silas want to hide that?

"Why do you think you stole those files from your father?" I ask him.

He shrugs. "I don't know. The only thing I can come up with is that maybe I hid them because I felt bad for you. Maybe I didn't want your father to go to prison for longer than he already was, because it would have broken your heart."

That sounds like something Silas would do.

"Are they still in your room?" I ask him.

Silas nods. "I think so. I'm pretty sure I read somewhere that I keep them near my bed."

"When we get to your house tonight, I think you should give them to your father."

Silas glances at me across the seats. "Are you sure about that?"

I nod. "He's ruined a lot of lives, Silas. He deserves to pay for that."

---

“Charlie didn’t know you had these?”

I’m standing outside Silas’s father’s study. When we walked in the door and he saw me with Silas, I thought he was going to hit him. Silas told him to give him five minutes to explain. He ran upstairs and got the files and brought them back down to his father.

I can’t hear their entire conversation. Silas is explaining to him that he hid them to protect me. He’s apologizing. His father is quiet. And then...

“Charlie? Can you come in here, please?”

His father scares me. Not in the way my father scared me. Clark Nash is intimidating, but he doesn’t seem evil. Not like Brett Wynwood.

I walk into his office and he motions for me to take a seat next to Silas. I do. He paces the length of his desk a few times and then stops. When he faces us, he’s looking directly at me.

“I owe you an apology.”

I’m sure he can see the shock in my expression. “You do?”

He nods. “I’ve been harsh on you. What your father did to me—to our company—that had nothing to do with you. Yet I blamed you when the files went missing, because I knew how fiercely you stood by him.” He glances back at Silas and says, “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t disappointed in you, Silas. Interfering with a federal investigation...”

“I was sixteen, Dad. I didn’t know what I was doing. But I do now, and Charlie and I both want to make things right.”

Clark Nash nods and then walks around his desk to take a seat. “So does this mean we’ll be seeing you around more often, Charlie?”

I glance at Silas and then back at his father. “Yes, sir.”

He smiles a little bit, and his smile looks just like Silas’s smile. Clark should smile more often.

“Very well, then,” he says.

Silas and I both take that as our cue to leave. As we’re walking up the stairs, Silas pretend-falls, sinking down on the top stair as he clutches his chest. “Christ, that man is terrifying,” he says.

I laugh and pull him back to his feet.

At least if things don’t work out in our favor tomorrow, we’ll have done one good deed.

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“Charlie, you were a good sport today,” Silas says, tossing me a t-shirt. I’m sitting cross-legged on his floor. I catch it and shake it out to see what’s on the front. It’s a camp t-shirt. He doesn’t offer pants.

“Is that your way of flirting with me?” I ask. “Bringing sport into your compliments?”

Silas makes a face. “Look around this room. Do you see anything sports related?”

It’s true. He seems to be more into photography than anything else. “You’re on the football team,” I say.

“Yeah, well, I don’t want to be.”

“Charlie says quit the football team,” I tell him.

“Maybe I will,” he says. With that, he swings open his bedroom door. I can hear him rushing down the stairs two at a time. I wait a moment to see what he’s up to, and then shortly thereafter, he’s running back up the stairs. His door swings back open and he smiles. “I just told my father I quit the football team,” he says proudly.

“What did he say?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I must be scared of him, because I ran back upstairs as soon as I told him.” He winks at me. “And what are *you* quitting, Charlize?”

“My dad.” My answer comes easy. “Charlie needs to walk away from things that stunt her emotional growth.”

Silas stops what he’s doing to look at me. It’s a weird look. One I’m not familiar with.

“*What?*” I suddenly feel defensive.

He shakes his head. “Nothing. It was a good thought, that’s all.”

I hug my knees and stare at the carpet. Why was it that when he complimented me my entire body went into overdrive? Surely his opinions couldn’t matter that much to Charlie. To *me*. Surely I would remember if they did. Whose opinions were really supposed to matter in life, anyway? Your parents? *Mine were screwed up*. Your boyfriend’s? *If you weren’t dating a saint like Silas Nash, that could go very wrong*. I think about what I would tell Janette if she were asking this question.

“Trust your gut,” I say out loud.

“What are you talking about?” Silas asks. He’s digging around in a box he found in his closet, but he leans back on his haunches to look at me.

“Trust your gut. Not your heart, because it’s a people pleaser, and not your brain, because it relies too heavily on logic.”

He nods slowly, never taking his eyes off of me. “Charlize, it’s really sexy when you get deep and say stuff like that. So unless you want to play another round of Silas Says, you might want to lay off the deep thinking.”

I put down the t-shirt and stare at him. I think about today. I think about our kiss and how I would be a liar if I said I wasn’t hoping he would kiss me like that again tonight. This time in private, without a dozen eyes on us. I reach down and tug at a piece of the carpet. I can feel my face grow warm.

“What if I *do* want to play another round of Silas says?” I ask.

“Charlie...” he starts, almost as if my name is a warning.

“What would Silas say?”

He stands up and so do I. I watch him run a hand across the back of his neck, my heart pounding like it’s trying to break free and run out of the room before Silas can get to it.

“Are you sure you want to play?” he asks, raking over me with his eyes.

I nod. *Because why not?* According to our letters, it won’t be the first time we’ve done this. And chances are, we probably won’t even remember it tomorrow. “I’m positive,” I say, attempting to come off way more confident than I feel right now. “It’s my favorite thing to do.”

He suddenly looks firm, more planted in his own skin. It’s thrilling to watch.

“Silas says...take off your shirt.”

I raise my eyebrows, but do as I’m told, lifting the hem of my shirt over my head. I hear his intake of breath, but I can’t seem to meet his eyes. The strap of my bra slips down my shoulder.

“Silas says...lower the other bra strap.”

My hand shakes a little as I do. He takes a slow step toward me, staring down to where my arm is still crossed over my chest. His eyes flicker up to mine. His mouth turns up at the corner. He thinks I’m about to quit playing this game. I can tell.

“Silas says...open the clasp.”

It’s a front clasp. I keep my eyes locked with his as I unlatch it. His Adam’s apple bobs as I shrug off my bra and hold it on the tip of my finger. The cold air and his eyes make me want to turn away. His gaze follows my bra as it falls to the floor. When he makes eye contact with me again, he’s smiling. But he’s not. I don’t know he does that—looks so happy and so serious at the same time.

“Silas says come here.”

I’m not able to turn away when he looks at me like that. I walk toward him, and when I’m near enough, he reaches for me. He puts his hand behind my head and threads his fingers through my hair.

“Silas says—”

“Shut up, Silas,” I interrupt. “Just kiss me.”

His head dips and he catches my lips in a deep kiss that tilts my head up to meet him. He presses his mouth against mine in a soft kiss, once, twice, three times before parting my lips with his tongue. Kissing Silas feels rhythmic, like we’ve had more than just this afternoon to figure it out. His hand tightly gripping my hair at the scalp makes me weak in the knees. I am out of breath and my eyes are glazed.

Do I trust him?

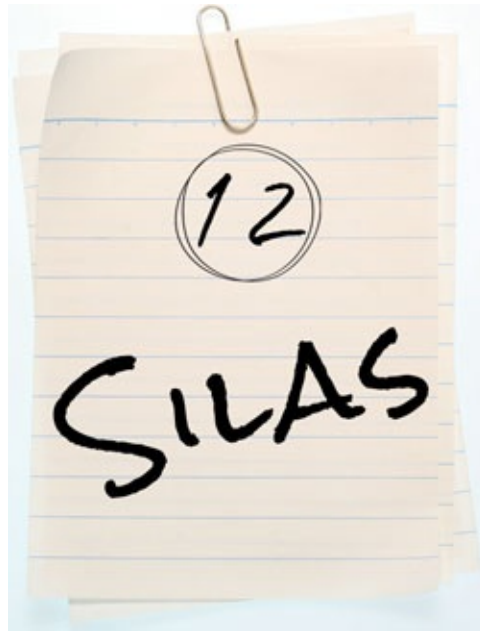
*I trust him.*

“Charlie says take your shirt off,” I say against his mouth.

“This game is called *Silas says*.”

I run my hands up the warm flesh of his stomach. “Not anymore.”





“Charlie Baby,” I whisper, sliding an arm over her. I press my lips against the curve of her shoulder. She rustles, then pulls the covers over her head. “Charlie, it’s time to wake up.”

She rolls over to face me but stays under the blanket. I lift it over my head until we’re both covered. She opens her eyes and frowns. “You smell good,” she says. “No fair.”

“I took a shower.”

“And brushed your teeth?”

I nod, and her brow furrows.

“That’s not fair. I want to brush my teeth.”

I lift the covers from her head and she puts a hand over her eyes and groans. “Then hurry up and brush your teeth so you can come back and kiss me.”

She crawls out of the bed and makes her way to the bathroom. I hear the sink begin to run, but that’s quickly drowned out by the noises that come from downstairs. Pots and pans clanking together, cabinet doors slamming. It sounds like someone is cleaning. I look at the clock and it’s almost 9:00 a.m.

*Two more hours.*

My bathroom door opens and Charlie runs across the room and hops on the bed, quickly pulling the covers over herself. “It’s cold out there,” she says, her lips quivering. I pull her to me and press my mouth to hers. “Better,” she mumbles.

And this is what we do while I try my best to lose track of time. We make out.

“Silas,” she whispers as I’m working my way up her neck. “What time is it?” I reach over to the nightstand and look at my phone. “Nine fifteen.”

She sighs, and I know exactly what she’s thinking. I’m thinking it too.

“I don’t want to forget this part,” she says, looking at me through eyes that look like two broken hearts.

“Me neither,” I whisper.

She kisses me again, softly. I can feel her heart racing through her chest, and I know it isn’t because we’re kissing under my covers. It’s because she’s scared. And I wish I could make it to where she isn’t scared anymore, but I can’t. I just pull her to me and hold her. I would hold her here forever, but I know there are things we need to be doing right now.

“We can hope for the best, but I think we should prepare for the worst,” I tell her.

She nods against my chest. “I know. Five more minutes, okay? Let’s just stay under the blanket for five more minutes and pretend we’re in love like we used to be.”

I sigh. “Pretending isn’t necessary for me at this point, Charlie.”

She grins and presses her lips to my chest.

*I give her fifteen minutes. Five isn’t enough.*

When our time is up, I crawl out of bed and pull her up. “We need to eat breakfast. That way if 11:00 a.m. hits and we freak out again, it’ll be a few hours before we have to worry about food.”

We get dressed and head downstairs. Ezra looks like she’s cleaning up breakfast when we walk into the kitchen. She sees Charlie rubbing sleep out of her eyes and she raises an eyebrow in my direction. She thinks I’m pushing my luck having Charlie in this house.

“Don’t worry, Ezra. Dad says I’m allowed to love her now.” Ezra returns my smile.

“You two hungry?” she asks.

I nod. “Yeah, but we can make our own food.”

Ezra waves a hand in the air. “Nonsense,” she says. “I’ll make your favorite.”

“Thanks, Ezra,” Charlie says with a smile. A mild look of surprise passes over Ezra’s face before she walks to the pantry.

“My god,” Charlie says under her breath. “Do you think I really used to be that awful? That it was shocking to ever hear me say thank you?”

About that time, my mother walks into the kitchen. She stops short when she sees Charlie. “Did you spend the night here?” My mother doesn’t seem very pleased.

“No.” I lie for Charlie. “I just picked her up this morning.”

My mother's eyes narrow. I don't have to have memory of her to know she's suspicious. "Why aren't you two at school right now?"

We're both quiet for a moment, but then Charlie blurts out, "It's a flex day."

My mother nods without question. She walks to the pantry and begins speaking to Ezra.

"What's a flex day?" I whisper.

Charlie shrugs. "I have no idea, but it sounded good." She laughs and then whispers, "What's your mother's name?"

I open my mouth to respond, but I draw a complete blank. "I have no idea. I'm not sure I ever wrote it in any notes."

My mother peeks her head out of the pantry. "Charlie, will you be joining us for dinner tonight?"

Charlie looks at me, and then at my mother. "Yes, ma'am. If I can remember."

I laugh and Charlie smiles, and for a split second, I forget what we're about to go through again.

I catch Charlie staring at the clock on the oven. I can see the worry, not only in her eyes, but in every single part of her. I grab her hand and squeeze it. "Don't think about that," I whisper. "Not for another hour."



"I have no idea how anyone could possibly forget how magnificent this is," Charlie says, taking the last bite of whatever it was that Ezra cooked for us. Some might call it breakfast, but food like this deserves its own category.

"What is this again?" Charlie asks Ezra.

"Nutella French toast," she responds.

Charlie writes *Nutella French Toast* down on a piece of paper and scribbles two hearts next to it. Then she adds a follow-up sentence that says, *You hate crawfish, Charlie!!!*

Before we leave the kitchen and head back to my room, Charlie walks over to Ezra and gives her a big hug. "Thank you for breakfast, Ezra."

Ezra pauses a moment before hugging her back. "You're welcome, Charlize."

"Will you make that for me next time I'm here for breakfast? No matter if I can't remember eating it today?"

Ezra shrugs and says, "I guess."

As we're walking upstairs, Charlie randomly says, "You know what? I think money is what made us mean."

"What are you talking about?" We reach my bedroom and I close the door

behind us.

“It just seems like maybe we were ungrateful. A little bit spoiled. I’m not sure our parents taught us how to be decent humans. So in a way...I’m grateful this happened to us.”

I sit on the bed and pull her back against my chest. She rests her head on my shoulder and tilts her face up to mine. “I think you were always a little nicer than me. But I don’t think either of us can be proud of who we were.”

I give her a quick peck on the lips and lean my head back against the wall. “I think we were a product of our environment. Inherently, we’re good people. We might lose our memories again, but we’re still the same on the inside. Somewhere deep down, we want to do good. *Be good*. Deep down we love each other. A lot. And whatever this is that’s happening to us, it’s not touching that.”

She slides her fingers through mine and squeezes. We sit in silence for a little while. Every now and then I’ll glance at my phone. We have about ten minutes left until 11:00 a.m., and I don’t think either of us knows how to spend that time. We’ve already written more notes than we’ll be able to comprehend in the next forty-eight hours.

All we can do is wait.



My heart is beating so hard, it's losing rhythm. My mouth is dry. I grab the bottle of water sitting on Silas's nightstand and down a big drink. "This is terrifying," I tell him. "I wish we could speed up the next five minutes and get this over with."

He sits up straighter on the bed and grabs my hand. "Sit in front of me."

I sit in front of him. We're both cross-legged on the bed, in the same position we were in at the hotel room two days ago. Thinking of that morning makes me ill. I don't want to acknowledge the possibility that in a few minutes, I might not know who he is.

I have to have faith this time. This can't go on forever. *Can it?*

I close my eyes and try to control my breathing. I feel Silas's hand reach up and brush the hair from my eyes.

"What's the one thing you're the most scared of forgetting?" he asks.

I open my eyes. "You."

He brushes his thumb over my mouth and leans in to kiss me. "Me too. I love you, Charlie."

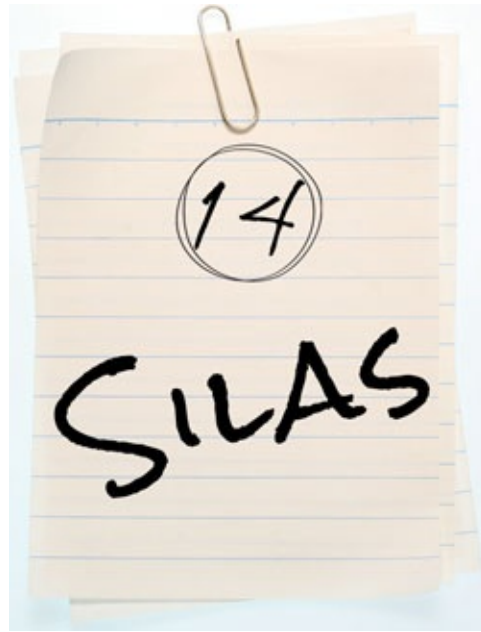
And without hesitation I say, "I love you, too, Silas."

When his lips meet mine, I'm no longer scared. Because I know that whatever happens in the next few seconds...it'll happen with Silas, and that brings me comfort.

He threads our fingers together and says, "Ten seconds."

We both inhale deep breaths. I can feel his hands shaking, but they aren't shaking nearly as badly as mine.

“Five...four...three...two...”



The only sound I hear is the thrashing of my heart. The rest of the world is chillingly silent.

My lips are still resting softly against hers. Our knees are touching, our eyes are closed, our breath is mingling between us as I wait to make my next move. I know for a fact that I didn't lose my memory this time. That makes twice in a row...but I have no idea about Charlie.

I slowly open my eyes so that I can see what's in hers. Her eyes remain closed. I watch her for a few seconds, waiting to see what her first reaction will be.

*Will she remember me?*

*Will she have no idea where she is?*

She begins to pull back, slowly, and her eyelids flutter open. There's a mixture of fear and shock in her expression. She pulls back a few more inches, studying my face. She turns her head and looks around the room.

When she glances back at me, my heart plummets down my chest like the drop of an anchor. *She has no idea where she is.*

"Charlie?"

Her tear-rimmed eyes swing to mine and she quickly covers her mouth with her hand. I can't tell if she's about to scream. I should have put a note on the door like we did last time.

She looks down at the bed and lowers her hand to her chest. "You were wearing black," she whispers.

Her gaze falls to the pillow next to me. She points at it. "We were right there.

You were wearing a black t-shirt, and I was laughing at you because I said it was too tight. I said it made you look like Simon Cowell. You pinned me to the mattress, and then..." Her eyes meet mine. "And then you kissed me."

I nod, because somehow...I remember every single moment of that. "It was our first kiss. We were fourteen," I say. "But I had been wanting to kiss you like that since we were twelve."

She slaps her hand over her mouth again. Sobs begin to rack her entire body. She lunges forward, wrapping her arms around my neck. I pull her down to the bed with me and everything comes rushing back in waves.

"The night you got caught sneaking in?" she says.

"Your mom went after me with a belt. Chased me right out of your bedroom window."

Charlie starts laughing between her tears. I'm holding her against me, my face pressed against her neck. I close my eyes and sort through all the memories. The good ones. The bad ones. All the nights she cried in my arms over the way things turned out between her mother and father.

"The phone calls," she says quietly. "Every single night."

I know exactly what she's talking about. I would call her every night and we would stay on the phone for an entire hour. When our memories left us, we couldn't figure out why we had talked for so long every night if our relationship was falling apart.

"Jimmy Fallon," I tell her. "We both loved Jimmy Fallon. And I would call you every night when his show would come on, and we would watch it together."

"But we never talked," she says. "We just watched the show together without speaking and then we'd go straight to sleep."

"Because I loved hearing you laugh."

Not only are the memories flooding me right now, but the feelings. All the feelings I've ever had for this girl are unfolding, and for a second I'm not sure if I can take it all in.

We hold each other tight as we rake through a lifetime of memories. Several minutes pass as we both laugh at the good memories and then more minutes pass as we succumb to the not so good ones. The hurt our parents' actions inflicted on us. The hurt we've caused each other. The hurt we've caused other people. We're feeling every bit of it, all at once.

Charlie clenches my shirt in her fists and buries her face in my neck. "It hurts, Silas," she whispers. "I don't want to be that girl again. How can we make sure we're not the same people we were before this happened to us?"

I run my hand over the back of her head. "But we *are* those people," I say to



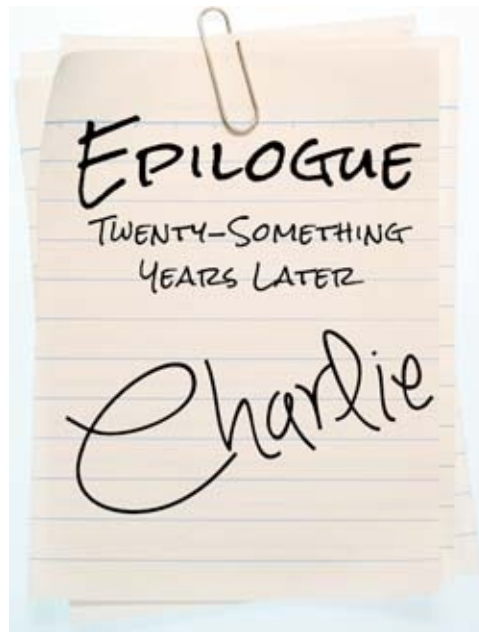
her. “We can’t take back who we’ve been in the past, Charlie. But we can control who we are in the present.”

I lift her head from my shoulder and hold her face in my hands. “Charlie, you have to promise me something.” I wipe her tears away with my thumb. “Promise me you will never fall out of love with me again. Because I don’t want to forget you all over again. I never want to forget a single second with you.”

She shakes her head. “I swear. I’ll never stop loving you, Silas. And I’ll never forget.”

I dip my head until my mouth meets hers. “*Never Never.*”

**The End**



Silas is bringing dinner home. I wait for him at the kitchen window while I pretend to wash vegetables for a salad. I like to pretend I'm washing things at the sink just so I can see when he pulls into the driveway.

His car pulls in ten minutes later; my fingers are pruned from the water. I grab for a dishtowel, feeling those damn butterflies in my stomach. They never went away. From what I've heard, that's a rare thing after this many years of marriage.

The kids get out of the car first. Jessa, our daughter, and then her boyfriend, Harry. Normally my eyes would go to Silas next, but something makes me linger on Jessa and Harry.

Jessa is just like me: stubborn, mouthy, and aloof. I'd cry, but she mostly makes me laugh with her one-liners. I like Harry; they've been together since freshman year and plan on going to the same college when they graduate next year. They're usually the epitome of teen love, all glassy eyed and touchy like Silas and I used to be. *Still are*. But today, Jessa stands off to the side of the driveway, her arms folded across her chest.

Harry gets out of the car too and goes to stand next to her. *They must be fighting*, I think. Jessa sometimes likes to flirt with the neighbor kid, and Harry gets upset.

Silas walks in a minute later. He grabs me from behind, wrapping his arms around me and kissing my neck.

"Hey, Charlie Baby," he says, breathing me in. I lean into him.

"What's up with those two?" I ask, still watching them out the window.

“I don’t know. They were really weird on the ride home. Barely spoke.”

“Uh, oh,” I say. “Must be the hot neighbor boy again.” I hear the front door slam, and I call Jessa into the kitchen. “Jessa, come here!”

She wanders in, slowly, without Harry in tow.

“What’s up?” I ask her. “You look shell shocked.”

“Do I?” she asks.

I look at Silas and he shrugs.

“Where’s Harry?”

Jessa jabs a thumb over her shoulder. “He’s in there.”

“Okay, well you two get ready for dinner. We’ll eat as soon as the salad is done.”

She nods, and I swear she’s going to start crying.

“Hey, Jessa,” I say as she turns around to leave.

“Yeah?”

“I was thinking we could go to Miami for your birthday next month. Does that sound okay to you?”

“Yeah,” she says. “Cool.”

When she’s gone I turn to Silas, whose eyebrows are drawn together.

“I didn’t know we were going to Miami,” he says. “I can’t get time off for work that quick.”

“Silas,” I say sharply. “Her birthday isn’t for six more months.”

The line between his eyes relaxes and his mouth opens. “Oh, yeah,” he says. And then realization hits. “Oh. *Oh.*” He brings a hand up to the back of his neck. “*Shit*, Charlie. Not again.”

# **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

THANK YOU TO OUR READERS. YOU MEAN THE WORLD TO US.

TARRYN AND COLLEEN

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