

We're Alright

by

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Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts & Letters

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Andrew Furman, Department of English, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts & Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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## Abstract

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The main desire behind this project was to construct a story that could be enjoyed by anyone of any age (for the most part). The author has been writing for over ten years at this point, and has always had an affinity for Young Adult literature. It was YA literature that made the author interested in becoming a writer in the first place. YA has the ability to help those who are too young to be considered “real adults” feel like there is someone out there that understands them and who takes them and their feelings into serious consideration. While, like any genre of literature out there, there are some more unsavory and less serious pieces of literature in this category, to always look down on it and say that it has no value or no place among other literature is ill mannered.

The story here depicts what life is like as a teenager, which many know and have experienced, but it shows how young people deal with all sorts of feelings and scenarios, ranging from small fights that won't matter the next day with friends you may not remember in ten years, to life changing and world shattering events that you won't ever forget, no matter how hard you may try.

The author of this piece wanted to portray a story where young people could feel heard and could relate, and where older generations could begin to understand that just because someone is young, doesn't mean that what they feel isn't real. The desire to reach the hearts of many is what lives in these pages and will continue to do so until that desire is met.

This project came about after almost two years, and while it is far from complete, it will be worked on until it can sit on its own and feel worthy of peoples eyes and fears.

## Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to all of those who have believed in me and helped me ever since I decided I wanted to pursue writing. There have been many instances in my life where I was told that there was no point in pursuing a career, or a career in the arts because I was sick or because artists can't survive on such a measly salary. But to those out there who never stopped believing in me and what I was doing, thank you.

Thank you to my parents for continuously providing for me and watching over me. In more ways than one, I wouldn't be where I am without them. Thank you to my little sister for always listening to me complain, whether it's about storylines or a book I just read or a show I just watched. Thank you for always being my first and foremost beta reader. Thank you to my little brother for making me laugh when I don't even realise that I need to.

Thank you to all of those who have taught me anything having to do with writing over the last six years. Thank you to those who read my writing on the internet when I was a teenager, and giving me the courage to write more seriously as I grew older.

Thank you to all of my friends over the years that have loved me for some reason or another. Even if we don't speak anymore, you meant something important to me at some point, and that will never change.

And thank you to my cats who are kind of jerks but I love you anyways.

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*“Do you really have to go? Why can’t you just stay here in a place of your own or with someone else or something?” Tears dusted her eyelashes and fell on her cheeks. She didn’t care if people saw her cry; what was the point?*

*Parker shook her head, “No I already asked and my parents looked at me like I was crazy. ‘I’m too young,’ ‘We couldn’t impose upon someone else like that,’ and other annoyingly true statements that just made me feel bad for asking.” She wrapped her arms around the girl in front of her, “Don’t worry, I’ll come back to visit as often as I can, plus you know you’re always more than welcome to come visit too. Jess, I’m not going to let a little move tear us apart after over a decade of being friends.”*

*Parker felt Jess nod her head into her shoulder. She had done her best to not let Jessica see her cry, but in that moment she felt a tear slip from her eye against her will.*

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Boxes lined the walls of just about every room and hallway in the house; some were empty and in need of being broken down, others were half unpacked, and some had yet to be even touched since being unloaded from the trailer.

Parker was maneuvering her way through the upstairs hallway, trying to get to the stairs that went down to the kitchen, when a shrill noise broke the previously silent house.

“When did the phone get hooked up?” She shuffled around looking for the source of the ringing. “And where is it?”

“On our bedroom floor!” She heard her dad yell from downstairs.

Parker squeezed past boxes, possibly knocking some over in the process, and got to the phone just before it stopped ringing.

“Hello?”

“Hi, is Emma Seely there?” asked the voice on the other end.

“Yeah, one moment please.” Parker clutched the phone to her chest before yelling, “Mom, the phone is for you!”

Her mom came out of the bathroom attached to the master bedroom less than a second later, frowning. “You didn’t have to yell, I’m right here.”

“Sorry! I didn’t know.” Parker handed her mom the phone and left the room, going back to her original goal of getting downstairs and scrounging for a snack. They had all been unpacking for the last three days, and no one had gone grocery shopping yet—they’d just been ordering takeout for pretty much every meal since they arrived—so she wasn’t super hopeful at what the pantry held.

And she was right not to get her hopes up. Groaning at the lack of food in the pantry, she turned to her dad, who was unpacking and washing their dishes.

“Dad, I’m hungry and there’s no food.” She continued before he could reply, “And if you say, ‘Hi, hungry. I’m dad,’ I will throw something at you.”

“Seems extreme if you ask me.” He laughed and set a plate in the drying rack before turning to face her. “You could go get some groceries if you’d like or pick up some food. You can take my card and my keys,” he offered.

“Yeah, alright.” Parker sighed. She wasn’t really in the mood to leave the house, but she was more in the mood to eat.

Dad got his keys and gave her his debit card. “Just be careful. If you get lost or anything, just call mom or me.” He hugged her.

“Shall do. I’ll be back in a bit.” She shut the front door behind her and climbed into the SUV.

Parker backed out of the driveway and pointed the car in the vague direction that she remembered food to be. They’d only been in town for a few days, and most of that time had been spent unpacking, so she had not had a good chance to explore or learn her new surroundings. She knew it would be easy to just pull up the map app on her phone and look to see what food options were in the vicinity, but something in her stopped her hand from reaching for her phone. She just wanted to drive and see what she came across. It didn’t really matter if she got lost, because she had the address of her new house in her phone; she was working on memorizing it along with the new home phone number, but she wasn’t quite there yet with either of them.

As she was keeping an eye out for food options, Parker tried not to let the silence of her phone bother her. Despite sending numerous texts herself, she hadn’t heard back from anyone since she first stepped through the door of her new house in Aurora. It was still winter break back home, despite the fact that she was starting at her new high school tomorrow, her old high school--and thus, all of her friends--were still on winter break. She attributed the lack of response to them being busy or on vacation or whatever else they may have going on.

She told herself over and over that it wasn’t *her*, there was some other reason they weren’t responding; she had been for days. It became a non stop mantra in her head, going at all times. The one that confused her more than anything was the silence from

Jess; they'd been best friends since kindergarten and yet she'd been so quiet when it came to responses in the week that Parker had been in Colorado. It's not like Parker hadn't heard from her at all, just so much less than she had expected.

The main thing she noticed while looking for food was the scenery. Truthfully, it wasn't all that different from home. She loved the fact that there were trees everywhere here too; it gave her a sort of comfort that despite leaving everything behind, the forestry seemed to have followed her.

In the distance, the Colorado mountains dotted the edge of the skyline. Even from here, she could easily see that they were all covered in snow, probably more than it seemed. What hadn't stopped at all in the time that they'd been there, had been the feeling that at any moment, it could snow.

Not much further down the road, Parker found a burger place that looked good and picked up enough food for the three of them before heading home. To her amazement, she remembered the way pretty easily without needing to pull up any directions. It gave her hope that learning a new town wouldn't be too much of a pain.

“Can’t I just go back to bed instead?” Parker stared out her window at the awfully bland building outside.

“Since when has my daughter been one to be scared of something?” Her dad had on his work clothes; a t-shirt with his company’s logo on it, ratty jeans, and work boots. His vest and hard hat were in the trunk with his laptop bag and the rest of the equipment he lugged to and from work sites.

He worked for a company that installed and programmed heating and cooling systems. He had been offered a promotion, which was the reason behind the move. It was a great promotion, which was surprising to the family since he had a good position before. But this one paid even more—enough to the point that they found it worth it to move—and put him in a higher position. While he was required to wear the vest and hard hat while on the job site—everyone was, for safety reasons—he did more of the programming than the actual installing, though he occasionally did both.

Parker frowned. “I’m not scared. I’m just tired, and like I said before, it’s weird to start at a new school part way through the year.”

Her dad reached across the middle console to hug her. “You got this.”

She laughed and shook her head as she got out of the car. “Whatever you say, dad.”

He waved to her as he drove away, leaving her standing out on the curb without a clue of where to go first. She figured she should go to the office, but she had no idea

where that was. Until a small woman in nice jeans and a parka came walk-jogging out of a door that led into the building in front of her.

“Are you Parker Seely?” The rather cold looking woman asked. Her head came to just below Parker’s chin, which was surprising, since Parker never considered herself tall in any sort of way.

“Uh, yeah. That’s me.”

“Oh, wonderful! I’m Vice Principal Meyers. Nice to meet you, and welcome to Southland High School.” She reached out and shook Parker’s hand.

“Oh, hi.” Parker was confused as to how she had known she was out here, but grateful nonetheless.

Vice Principal Meyers laughed. “Yes, follow me and we can get your class schedule from my office.”

Parker followed her through a door that was labeled “Office Staff Only”, and into the main office space. One of the doors behind the front desk had Vice Principal Meyers name on it, and the one next to it was labeled “Principal Mason”.

Vice Principal Meyers opened the door to her own office and grabbed Parker’s class schedule off the top of her desk. “Principal Mason wanted to be here to welcome you herself, but she had some family matters to attend to, so she asked me to do it.”

Parker gladly accepted her schedule, “Well, thank you. And I hope everything is alright with Principal Mason.”

“That’s very sweet of you.” Vice Principal Meyers walked Parker out of the office and into what looked like the main hallway of the building. “Alright, your first class is

homeroom, and it'll be just down the hall and on your right, in room seven. If you ever need anything, feel free to come find me in my office. Have a good first day, Parker.”

Parker gave her a smile and turned around to walk in the direction of the classroom. She had about fifteen minutes until her class started, and on her schedule was also her locker number and combination, so she decided to find that really quick before heading to room seven. On the back of her schedule was a map of the school, which wasn't very big.

As simple as the map was to read, she still got confused a couple times trying to find her locker. It didn't really matter how simple a school layout was, she had her old school hallways etched permanently into her mind, to the point that while trying to find her locker for the first time, she almost ran into a few different walls.

Finally she located locker 256 and opened it on the first try. She then found herself staring at the empty locker because she currently didn't have anything she needed to put in there, since there was barely anything in her backpack to begin with. So, she shrugged off her backpack and set it on the floor, and then shrugged off her big, winter coat and stuffed that in the locker.

She pulled her backpack back onto her shoulder, and turned around to head back towards room seven, but was instead met with the colliding sense of running straight into someone. The force knocked both Parker and the stranger over, causing them to drop their belongings; for Parker, it was just her backpack and the piece of paper with her schedule on it. For the stranger, it was multiple books, notebooks, and a soft pencil case.

“Oh my gosh, I am so sorry.” Parker stumbled over her words and she scrambled to help the person pick up their stuff.

She handed the guy—she finally looked up and actually saw who it was that she ran into—the stuff of his that she had collected. He had light brown hair that was shaggy and curled around his ears, and his eyes were bright green. He was wearing a red flannel, with a white t-shirt, plain jeans, and some basic black sneakers.

People were passing by them in all different directions, most of them paying no mind to the two people on the ground, but a few slowed down to snicker and share some of their thoughts under their breath.

*“Wow, desperate much?” “Right? You don’t need to run into someone to get them to notice you.” “Do you guys recognize her? I think she might be new.” “Makes more sense as to why she is on the floor with him.”*

“It’s alright; no harm, no foul.” He had a kind face, and was smiling, paying no mind to the comments being thrown their way, despite the Parker knew he had to have heard them. After running into him, and hearing what some of the other students had to say despite not being asked, she didn’t really know how to proceed, and she started to panic just ever so slightly.

“I just moved here.” The words blurted from her mouth as if she had no power in stopping them. Parker was never usually anxious or nervous around new people, but considering she had just plowed into this person with the full force of someone who wasn’t paying attention, she was, at the very least, a little bit embarrassed.

The boy in front of her laughed, lightly, in a way that was obviously not making fun of her. “I guessed as much, seeing as I didn’t see you around here last semester. Where’d you move from?” He easily transitioned the conversation past the awkward blurring out of a random personal fact, and she was instantly appreciative.



“I moved from Washington State,” she said much more calmly than the first time.

“Wow, that’s quite the move. Well, welcome to our little piece of Aurora. What’s your first class?”

“Home room, in room seven,” Parker replied.

“Well lucky you, because you have that with me.” He smiled and Parker chuckled.

“Well alright, lead the way.” She gestured for him to walk so she could follow.

“I’m Parker, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Parker. I’m Dylan.” He gave her a smile and led them to room seven. Even with the run in, they still had a few minutes before class officially started.

Dylan took a seat in the second row and gestured for Parker to take the desk to his left. She happily accepted the invitation to sit next to someone, even if she had only known that person for less than five minutes.

There were only a few other people in the room at that moment, but slowly, more students began to file into the room, taking desks here and there, until every desk was filled. Just as the clock turned and class was supposed to begin, in strolled someone who Parker assumed was their teacher.

He was on the younger side, and wore nice, dark jeans, and a basic, light blue button-up.

“Good to see so many familiar faces.” He scanned the piece of paper he was holding, and continued, “And it looks like we have a new student this semester. I want everyone to give a warm welcome to Parker Seely. I’m Mr. Hammond.” He gave Parker a warm smile, and her cheeks color piqued a little bit at the attention from the class.

“Where are you from, Parker? If you don’t mind me asking.” Mr. Hammond looked genuinely intrigued.

“I just moved here from Washington State.” Parker replied.

“Ah, so you’re used to the cold.” Mr. Hammond chuckled.

“Yeah, just a little.” Parker gave a small smile wishing for nothing else but the attention to be shifted away from her. Thankfully, Mr. Hammond seemed to take the facial queue she was giving, or was just done with his “new student” spiel, and went on to whatever he had intended for them that day.

---

Dylan followed Parker out of the classroom when the bell rang. “Sorry about that. He does that with all the new students.”

“I figured,” Parker shrugged, waving away the apology. “I don’t really mind; I just know I’m going to have similar interactions at least five more times today.”

“What class do you have next?” he asked.

She just handed him her schedule since she figured that would be easiest. He took a minute to scan it, before handing it back.

“Well, we have three periods together, one obviously being Homeroom, the others being free period and World Lit.”

“Cool, I’ll have someone to help me when I’m inevitably lost and confused here.” She smiled.

“I got your back,” Dylan laughed. The warning bell rang, signally they had two minutes to get to their next class. “You should sit with us at lunch.”

Parker nodded and then they separated, so they could get to their differing classes on time before they got in trouble for being late on the first day.

During her walk to her next class, Parker pulled her phone out of her back pocket to check it. The screen lit up to show that there wasn't anything she had missed. She held in her sigh and shoved it back into her pocket as she walked into an already almost full classroom and took one of the few open seats she could find.

The rest of Parker's morning classes went smoothly, and as she had suspected, each teacher had introduced her to the class, asking where she had moved from and other first day questions which warranted answers that no one really paid attention to.

She decided to use the bathroom really quick before making her way to lunch. She mostly wanted to wash her hands and just have a minute to catch her breath. Nothing about the day had been particularly stressful for anxiety inducing, but there was a lot happening and she needed a moment to herself. Thankfully, the bathroom she found was empty.

She washed her hands and dried them before taking a look at herself in the mirror. Her outfit wasn't anything too special, at least to her; just black skinny jeans, black boots, and her long sleeve purple Space Needle t-shirt.

Once she was feeling a little more calm, she left the bathroom and found herself in a crowd of people in the hallway. With the rest of the students moving towards the cafeteria, Parker made her way, hoping that she would spot Dylan easily and not be forced to stand awkwardly in front of everyone, scanning the groups of people for an unreasonably long amount of time.

The cafeteria was decently big, with tables spread out in a half circle that opened towards the main door that the throng of students all walked through.

Parker stepped off to the side so she wasn't blocking people who actually knew where they were going, and looked around for Dylan. Her earlier wish came true, because

in less than ten seconds she spotted him sitting at a table on the far end of the room. She made her way towards him, weaving around other people and trying not to run into anyone else on her first day.

Dylan saw her, and waved her over. “Hey, newbie.”

She smiled despite the tiny jab--though she figured he wasn't trying to be mean--because it was just such a relief to be able to cling to someone on her first day, just a little. “So, who's this ‘us’ you were referring to earlier, because unless they're invisible, it seems to me that you're sitting here on your own.”

“Hardy har. They'll be here soon. Then I can introduce you.”

Just a few minutes later, three people joined the table, each of them making some quizzical facial expression *about* Parker, and definitely not *to* her.

She recognized one of them as a guy from her Chemistry class that morning, but she hadn't got his name.

“Hey guys, this is Parker. Parker, this is Renae, Scott, and Lucas.” Dylan introduced them all, and addressed the guy from Parker's Chemistry class as Scott. At least now she knew his name. Scott had brown eyes that were pale enough to be considered hazel, but also weren't dark enough to blend in with his pupils. His hair matched his eyes and he had a smile on his face. He was wearing a dark denim jacket, black pants, and boots.

“Nice to meet you guys.” Normally, Parker would've offered to shake their hands. But she didn't want to seem rude by reaching over the table.

“We have Chemistry together, yeah?” Scott asked.

Parker nodded her head in agreement.

“Cool. Well, it’s nice to officially meet you.” Scott grinned and Parker smiled back.

“You too.”

They all chatted while eating lunch, exchanging pleasantries and asking Parker questions about where she was from and why she moved and similar things.

“You don’t happen to have a car, do you?” Renae asked. “Dylan’s is in the shop, and he’s the only one that has his own car out of all of us. The rest of us use our parents’ cars when we can.”

Parker shook her head. “No, I had to sell mine before we moved. We also sold my dad’s car, and just kept the SUV. It was easier than moving with three cars. My parents told me they’ll help me get another one with the money from the sale, I just have to find a reasonably priced one on like Craigslist or something.”

Renae raised her eyebrow, “So your parents are just going to buy you a car?”

“I mean, they did make me sell the one I had.” Parker shrugged, trying to indicate it wasn’t a big deal, but Renae’s tone had annoyed her. She tried not to let it get to her, after all, she didn’t know this person in the slightest.

Lunch continued with the four of them talking and laughing about things that Parker didn’t get, so she just stayed quiet, looking intrigued, and followed along with the conversation. Towards the end, Parker checked her phone again out of habit. This time, she was greeted with a *Have a good first day at your new school!* <3 text from Jess.

*So she hasn’t already forgotten about me.* Parker was both incredibly relieved and thrilled to see that Jess had finally texted her back.

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Lunch ended and Scott, Renae, and Lucas all headed off to whatever classes they had, while Parker and Dylan decided to head to the library for their free period.

“Hey Dylan, I have a question.” The thing that happened with Renae at lunch was still at the forefront of her mind.

“What’s up?”

“Is Renae one of those girls who just doesn’t like other girls that become friends with their friends?”

Judging by the look on Dylan’s face, Parker’s question took him by surprise. “Oh, uh, no. If anything, I think she wants more girl friends. She only really ever hangs out with the three of us guys.”

Parker wasn’t really sure what to take of that, so she didn’t say anything. She just nodded and continued to follow him towards the library.

Dylan pushed open the door to the library and sadly, Parker was underwhelmed. She loved libraries and books, and this was just like any other run down, high school library. Cheap, metal shelves created aisles along the room, while the same kind of shelving ran long the back wall. Pale, wood tables that each had six chairs surrounding them took up the open area that was just past the desk where a couple of people—presumably librarians—were sat. Just past, and slightly behind, the main desk was a single row of computers with small privacy dividers in between each workstation.

The two of them took places at a couple of computers and set their backpacks on the floor. There wasn’t much to do yet when it came to schoolwork, so Parker decided it was a good time to start looking around for a car. The sooner she found one and got her

parents approval, the sooner she would be to not have to ask to borrow the SUV whenever she needed or wanted to go somewhere.

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The rest of Parker's classes for the day went smoothly. She found out she had French with Lucas, one of the other people she had sat with at lunch who had been kind of quiet. Lucas had icy blue eyes and hair that was so close to being black, that most people wouldn't catch the slight brown undertone. He was wearing a sweater and khakis, and his coat and scarf were hanging over the back of his chair.

They ended up sitting next to each other, which was set their seats for the entire semester, and Parker found out that he was actually talkative and funny if you got him comfortable enough.

World Literature was her last class, and after it, Dylan insisted on exchanging numbers.

"Because we're actually officially friends now, whether you like it or not, despite you having run into me just this morning." Dylan extended his hand, indicating to Parker that he would like her to put her phone in it.

She sighed and handed it over. "I *guess* we can be friends. If only so I don't look like someone who is exceptionally lonely." Despite her sarcastic demeanor, she was immensely grateful that Dylan had been so kind after running into him, and so willing to show her around and be her friend. She felt like being the new kid wouldn't be so hard now that she actually had at least one official friend.



Parker's dad was waiting in front of the school for her, right where he dropped her off earlier that morning, when she walked outside. He smiled at her as she climbed in the car and buckled her seatbelt.

"So, how was the first day of school?"

"I ran face first into someone about five minutes after I got here," she told him.

"Jeez, Park. Way to make a first impression," he couldn't get his sentence out all the way since he was laughing too much at the clumsiness of his daughter.

"Ha-ha, very funny. Well, we're friends now, so no harm, no foul." She smiled.

"Oh good, you made a friend! I was worried you were going to become some antisocial hermit who never left the house unless she was forced to." He grinned and Parker rolled her eyes.

"Oh, thanks for the vote of confidence, dad."

"Anything for you, sweetheart."

The rest of the short drive home was a peaceful sort of quiet; neither of them felt pressured to talk or to ask the other forced questions about their day. Parker took to looking out her window and admiring the landscape around her, and how much it reminded her of home. There was no doubt that even with the gained friendship of Dylan, she still had this pang in her chest of longing to go back home. To see her friends and her school and pretend like none of this had ever happened; that it had been a bad dream that she could just forget as she walked the halls with the people she knew by her side.

Parker knew it did her nothing to dwell on what couldn't be, so she did her best to push the thoughts out of her mind. It wasn't going to help her find a car or pass her classes, which meant it wasn't important to her.

Mr. Hammond pulled Parker aside before class started.

“Principal Mason would like to see you in her office during Homeroom today.”

“Alright, any reason?” Parker asked. She tried not to worry too much, but it was only the third day of being at the school and she was already being called to the principal’s office.

“No, she didn’t say. But I wouldn’t worry about it too much.” He gave her an encouraging smile.

She nodded and gripped her backpack strap a little tighter before heading out of the classroom and towards the office. Once she was outside of Principal Mason’s door, she rapped on it three times with her knuckles and took a step backward.

She heard a faint, “Come in!” from inside the room, so she pushed down on the handle and the door swung open with ease. The walls of the office were lined with overflowing bookshelves that had books stacked on them in the most precarious of ways. In the middle of all of the bookshelves was a large, dark-stained wood desk, and sitting at that desk was—who Parker assumed to be—Principal Mason.

Principal Mason stood to greet Parker properly and shake her hand, and Parker was immediately taken away by the woman’s height, though she tried her hardest not to let it show on her face. Vice Principal Meyers had come below Parker’s chin, while Principal Mason towered a good foot or so above her.

Maybe it was the height, or just every aspect of her, but Principal Mason looked like the kind of person who could easily command respect just by looking at you. Immediately Parker admired her for her stature, and the way she refused to let her shoulders slouch, giving her some kind of impression of folding in on herself, as most people did.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Parker. I apologize for not being able to be here to greet you on your first day,” Principal Mason smiled and instantly any anxiety Parker was feeling about the situation dissipated.

“Oh, it’s really okay. Vice Principal Meyers said you had some family business to attend to.” Parker did her best to sound reassuring, and not like she was trying to pry out information from her principal about *what* the family business had been. “I hope everything is okay,” Parker followed up with.

“Thank you, Parker. And yes, everything is fine. I just wanted to formally introduce myself and ask you if there was anything I could do or help you with to make your transition into our school run a little more smoothly.” She raised her eyebrows as she finished her sentence, indicating for Parker to speak and ask any questions she may have.

“Truthfully, I think everything is fine. All of my teachers seem nice, and I’ve already met and befriended a few students who have been extremely helpful if there’s anything I’ve been confused about. I was surprised at first, but everyone here seems so kind and genuine. It’s a comfort to be welcomed so easily.” Parker was telling the truth, for the most part. There had been those people passing by in the hallway her first day after her run in with Dylan that had made some sly comments, but nothing since then had

happened. Sure, teenagers were sometimes a little all over the place when it came to moods and their days, but the students here seemed to have a harness on not letting that affect the people around them who had done nothing to provoke any ill feelings they may be having.

Principal Mason smiled widely, “Well I am so beyond thrilled to hear that. Still, if anything comes up or you think of something you need, please do not be a stranger. While, yes, technically my door is closed, you are always welcome to stop by.”

“Well, thank you very much, Principal Mason.” Parker stood to go, giving her principal one last smile, before exiting her office and shutting the door behind her.

Once she was in the hallway, Parker checked the clock on her phone. Homeroom only had a couple more minutes before it was over, so she walked to the room her next class was in—which was Pre-Calculus—and went over her homework that she had done the night before, just making sure she hadn’t missed anything.

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The bell had barely just rung—signaling that Chemistry was starting—when Mrs. Butters started giving instructions so fast that it made heads swim.

“Alright, you are all going to pair up. I’m leaving it up to you, since this isn’t a third grade class and you’re old enough to choose your own science partners, but do not forget that I will not hesitate to switch pairings as I see fit if you and the person you pair up with become too rowdy or distracting for the rest of the class.

“Once you find a partner, find an open work station and pull out your textbooks, which should then be opened to page 72...” Parker had stopped listening at this point

because it was too much information all at once, especially since she didn't really know anyone well enough to ask them to be her partner.

She decided that the best plan of attack would be to sit and wait where she was, and whoever else was left, she could just pair up with them.

What she didn't see behind her was Scott gathering up his textbook, backpack, and jacket, and making his way to where she was sitting. "Hey, Parker," his sudden voice startled her, causing her to spin around so fast that she almost fell off the stool she was sitting on.

"Oh, hey Scott. Sorry, you spooked me."

Scott chuckled sheepishly, "My bad; didn't mean to. Do you want to be partners?"

Parker was taken aback, just a little bit. She considered Scott a friend—well, more a friend of a friend—she just didn't think that they were to the "become science partners" level of friendship. That being said, she definitely wasn't going to turn down his offer of being her partner.

She nodded and Scott took the open stool next to her, laying out his textbook in front of the both of them, and setting his backpack on the ground. "So, did you hear what page we were supposed to have this open to?"

"I have no clue," Parker sighed.

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"Vice Principal Meyers and Principal Mason both seem really nice." Parker commented. She and Dylan, as well as Scott, Renae, and Lucas, were all sitting at the same lunch table they had sat at during Parker's first day. Even though it was only the

third day, it already seemed to be a habit for her to join them there for lunch. While Scott and Lucas seemed to have already warmed up to her, Parker wasn't sure what to make of Renae. She thought back to what Dylan had said about her probably wanting more girl friends, and if Parker was being honest with herself, that's all she really wanted too. Being away from Jess was hard, and while she heard from her occasionally, it would be nice to have someone here who could, not take Jess' place in her life, but be another good friend that she could talk to and rely on, and also be there for.

Everyone just nodded their agreements without really saying anything. The table was quiet for a minute, before Lucas piped up. "Hey, Parker. We all do a weekly movie night on Fridays. Do you want to join us this weekend?"

Parker swallowed the bite of food in her mouth before responding. "Yeah, I'd love to."

The group all smiled, even Renae. "Cool, one of us will add you to the group text. The only requirement of attending is occasionally hosting; we always rotate and trade off weeks."

"That should be no problem; my parents are pretty chill. And if we're being honest, they'll be thrilled to see that I have actual, physical friends that I did not conjure from the depths of my imagination." Parker's retort earned a light laugh from everyone.

Parker picked her backpack up off of the floor to grab her water bottle from the side pocket when Renae spoke up.

"What are all those pins on your bag?"

"Oh, just different pins and buttons I've collected over time. Different shows and characters I like. I mostly put them on my bag to make it a little more interesting since

my backpack is a basic black thing from Costco.” Parker smiled. She never seriously collected pins or anything, but the ones she did have she really liked. Most of them she had picked out herself, but a few had been gifts from Jess and her parents for birthdays or Christmas’ or just “I saw this and thought of you.”

“Well, I like them. They’re really colourful.” Renae smiled and went back to eating her lunch.

It had been a small compliment, but it made Parker incredibly happy to the point that she had to try and hide how much she just wanted to grin.

“What do you mean I can’t use the car tonight? You already said that I could.” Parker was standing in the kitchen, ready to head to Renae’s house for movie night, when her parents seemingly changed their minds about her taking the SUV.

“We’re sorry, honey. It’s not because of you. I have an emergency meeting with a client that I just can’t miss,” Emma put a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. All Parker wanted to do was shrug it off, but she didn’t. It would’ve been unnecessarily mean to do that to her mom when it wasn’t really her fault.

“Alright. I’ll just let them know I won’t make it.” Parker, defeated, pulled out her phone and headed in the direction of her bedroom.

*Sorry guys, I’m not going to make it. My mom needs the car tonight.*

Parker shrugged off her jacket and threw it on the back of her desk chair. Her phone buzzed in the back pocket of her jeans.

*Where do you live?* It was Scott. Parker responded with her address and waited for his response. It came in less than a minute: *You’re only about five minutes from me, do you want me to pick you up on my way?*

Parker typed out a *Yes please!* in response, to which Scott told her he’d be there in five. She grabbed her jacket and thrust her arms back into the sleeves before making her way down the stairs and into the kitchen, where now only her dad sat at the counter with his laptop open in front of him and floor plans of some project he was working on pulled up on the screen.



He looked up from his computer and raised his eyebrow.

“One of my friends is going to pick me up so I can still go. Is that okay?” Parker asked, even though she had already told Scott to get her, because she figured her dad wouldn’t care.

“Course, muffin.” Parker frowned at the pet name from her childhood, but her dad ignored it, “Have fun and be safe. Call me if you need anything.”

“Shall do!” She gave him a hug, and he gave her one of those classic dad-forehead-kisses before she headed for the door. It was perfect timing too, because just as Parker pulled open her front door, a silver, mid-size SUV pulled up in front of her house. The passenger side window rolled down to reveal a smiling Scott.

“Hey!” Parker smiled as she pulled open the door and climbed into the front seat. “Thank you so much for picking me up. I was really bummed when I thought I was going to have to miss it.”

“Of course! I was bummed too,” he tensed ever so slightly, “as was everyone else. It already kind of feels like you’re a part of the gang.”

Parker laughed, completely oblivious to Scott’s vocal faux pas. “‘Gang’? What is this, Scooby Doo?”

“Of course! I’m Fred, obviously. Dylan is more of a Velma type, while Lucas and Renae are both Shaggy and Scooby, considering they’ve been glued at the hip since preschool. Which means you are left to be our Daphne.”

Parker snorted. “I’m totally telling Renae that you called her a dog.”

“Oh gosh. You’re going to get me punched in the face,” Scott groaned, causing Parker to laugh even more.

They continued to joke around and laugh until they pulled up in front of Renae's house. They both climbed out of the car and walked up the driveway to the front door. The house was a well-kept, one story home painted in white, with dark green trim. The yard was bare looking due to the time of year, but was still obviously kept up despite the periodic snow that covered the area.

The front door opened to a smiling Renae. "Oh good, you guys made it! Come in, come in. And please put your shoes in the basket." In the last few days, since they had all invited Parker to join their weekly movie nights, Renae had been acting warmer towards her. Parker assumed it was because she had been skeptical of the fact that she was new and Renae was probably used to what she was used to, but nonetheless, Parker was immensely grateful. While getting to know the boys—Dylan and Scott more so—had been great, Parker definitely wouldn't turn down the potential of having a girl friend that she could talk to about the stuff she couldn't with the others.

Renae walked away from the door to allow them room to step into the threshold and remove their shoes. There was a large, blue wicker basket on the floor near the door that was full of shoes.

Scott placed his shoes gingerly on top of the pile, while Parker tossed hers next to his, not as gently as Scott had been, but not rough enough to cause a mini shoe avalanche.

The entryway of the house opened up into a room that seemed to consist of the living room, the dining room, and an entrance to the kitchen. Renae showed Parker around the living room, and then took her into the kitchen. The kitchen may have been on the smaller side, but was the cleanest thing Parker had ever seen. The walls were a soft, pale yellow that combined with the lights in the ceiling, weren't harsh to the eyes. There

were cute jars lined up on one of the counters that held flour and sugar, and pasta and rice.

“Dude, this is the cutest kitchen I think I’ve ever seen,” said Parker.

Renaë beamed, “Thanks! My mom let me help decorate it. The jars were my idea; I found them at a thrift shop.”

“I love them!”

It had been obvious to Parker that Renaë, probably having learned from her parents, was able to make a lot out of what she had, since the day they had met. And it was more obvious now, having learnt the thing about the jars. It wasn’t a bad thing. It was small things Parker had noticed. Like Renaë’s wardrobe; there were a few items that she wore often that Parker had taken note of, but she was always able to change things up that it wasn’t obvious that she re-wore things very often.

Parker set her jacket on the back of one of the kitchen chairs before going into the living room and flopping onto the large, L-shaped couch. Lucas was sitting on the shorter section of the couch with a blanket that made Parker think Renaë had been sitting there before she and Scott had arrived. Dylan ended up sitting on one side of Parker while Scott sat on the other, all three of them on the longer end of the couch. Renaë emerged from her kitchen later with two big bowls of popcorn, handing one to Lucas, and the other to Dylan.

Renaë, like Lucas, also had blue eyes. But her’s weren’t as bright as they were more of an icy blue; in certain light they teetered closer to grey. At the moment, her dirty blonde hair was tied up on the top of her head, and she was wearing a t-shirt and a pair of

sweats, which was a big difference to her usual dark jeans and black jacket look she tended to go for.

“So,” Parker popped a piece of popcorn in her mouth, “what movie are we watching?”

“How does everyone feel about *Inception*?” Dylan asked, and was met with no protests, only agreements.

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Parker waved to Scott from her front door before stepping inside and shutting and locking the door behind her. The movie night had been great, and she could confidently say that everyone there was officially a friend.

She left her shoes and jacket at the door and walked into the kitchen only to find her dad in the same spot as where she left him.

“Working hard or hardly working?” Parker patted her dad on the shoulder as she walked past him into the kitchen. All the popcorn she had eaten at Renae’s had made her thirsty, and while she felt more comfortable around everyone, she had been too nervous to ask for a glass of water.

“Oh, you know, a little bit of both.” Parker’s dad took off his reading glasses and set them on the kitchen table. “How was movie night?”

Parker took a sip of her water and set it on the counter before jumping up to sit next to it. “It was a lot of fun. We watched *Inception*.”

“Ooo, that’s a good movie. And your friends? How is that going?”

Parker had shared with her dad a lot since first meeting them all, including how skeptical she had been about Renae.

“It’s going well. Renae seems to have warmed up to me a lot, which is quite the reprieve. I just really want to be friends with her, with all of them truly. It can just be harder sometimes to get along with girls. Guys are easy unless all they want is to sleep with you, then they’re just annoying and turn into crybabies the second they think you’ve ‘friendzoned’ them.”

Parker’s dad couldn’t help but laugh at what his daughter had said. “I guess you’re not wrong about that. Aren’t you too young to be this analytical about relationships?”

“Thomas please,” she held up her hand and called her dad by his first name to prove that she meant business, “I’m plenty old enough to analyze the teenage mind and how it deems handling relationships in the most appropriate way possible.”

All her dad did was roll his eyes and turn back to his work. Parker laughed and took her water upstairs to her room with her.

She shut her bedroom door behind and grabbed her backpack that she had left leaning against the wall earlier. Her desk was a mess, but she cleared it off and set down her water and her phone before pulling out her notebooks from her bag. It wasn’t too late, so it was a good time to get started on the weekends homework. As much as she loved being able to do things in a timely manner, and was pro at procrastinating and leaving everything until the last second. It was a bad habit she wanted to try hard to break. She set up everything she needed on her desk in front of her, but before she actually started, she grabbed her phone to text Jess real quick.

*Hey! was just thinking of you and wanted to say hi and i miss you! hope you have a good last weekend before school starts on monday. ily! <3*

She set her phone down on the desk and got started on her Chemistry homework. It was her least favourite subject so she always tried to knock it out first so she could just get it done and over with. She spent the next thirty minutes working on Chemistry until her eyes started to burn from staring at the small words on the pages of her textbook and she needed a break. She checked her phone and saw that Jess had texted back:

*ily2!! <3*

Parker tried not to be annoyed that her response was so lacking and instead be grateful she got a response at all. She put her phone back down and continued working on her homework until she had finished most of it and could barely keep her eyes open anymore. She changed out of her clothes into some pajamas and fell face first into bed where she laid for approximately three minutes before falling asleep.

“What are you doing tonight?” Dylan hadn’t even sat down before he was asking Parker this question. And because of Dylan’s glorious timing, Parker’s mouth was full of food, so she frowned, swallowed, and finally responded:

“Nothing, why?”

“Do you want to study together? My parents won’t be home and I don’t really feel like sitting in my house all alone.” He looked sheepish. “Plus, we haven’t hung out much, just the two of us, in a while. It could be nice.”

“Sure, dude! Do you want to come over to mine?”

Dylan nodded, and took a bite of his sandwich.

“Sweet. Do you just want to come home with me after school to make it easier?”

Parker stirred the soup she had sat in front of her.

“Yeah, that would be great. If your dad doesn’t mind, of course.”

“I’m sure he won’t.”

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And he didn’t. Parker texted her dad during free period and asked him, and he said it would be more than fine if Dylan came over and studied after school.

The three of them—Parker, her dad, and Dylan—all walked in the house when they got home and dropped their shoes at the door; Parker and Dylan headed up to her room, while her dad pulled out his computer and sat at the kitchen table to finish up some work from earlier in the day.

Parker tossed her jacket on the back of her desk chair and set her backpack on the floor against her bed before flopping down onto her comforter.

Dylan stood in the middle of her room, jacket still on and backpack still slung over his shoulder. He had yet to be in Parker's room, and what he was met with was not what he was expecting, though he realized he didn't know what he had expected. But whatever it was, it wasn't this. This was bare. This was plain. This was the room of nobody, not of Parker. Not of somebody that Dylan had come to know was so full of light.

The room around him was pale and boring. The walls were white, well, not quite white, and there was nothing on them. No pictures, no posters, no art, no ticket stubs. No nothing. There were plain closet doors on tracks that were brass and barely showed through the carpet that was tan and boring and didn't have a rug or even have a stain on it to make it livelier. Against one wall was a dresser with five drawers and sat on the top of that dresser was no picture frames, no jewelry trees or candles. There were a couple of books, and although Dylan couldn't identify them from where he was, they looked like textbooks.

The desk in the corner wasn't much different; on it were pencils and schoolbooks, a few notebooks and some folders. Highlighters, pens, a cup or two. A jacket was on the back of the desk chair, where it had just been thrown.

The bed had the most character out of what could currently be seen in the room—obviously not including the inside of the closet since the doors were closed, so who knows what was in there—as it was covered in blankets of varying colours, some unfolded clothes, and a teenage girl's body.



Parker heard Dylan chuckle from where she was laying with her eyes closed.

“Yeah, that looks like great studying posture.”

She turned over and opened her eyes to look at him. “Well, I’m *so* sorry if I’m tired after that long day of school we just endured,” she punctuated her sentence by sticking her tongue out at him.

Dylan flopped onto the bed next to her and shifted to look her in the eye, “You do know we both went through the same school day, aside from the differences in our schedules, right? Like, my day was just as long as yours.”

“Yes,” she turned over, “but you are obviously more equipped to manage such a daunting task than I am. Obviously, you are superior when it comes to taking in loads of useless crap and not wanting to die afterwards.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that.” Parker lifted her eyebrow up at him in an inquisitive way. “Not *everything* we learn there is useless.” Dylan had a mischievous grin on his face, which made Parker laugh and shove him over.

They spent the next few hours studying for the World Lit test they had coming up, and working on whatever individual homework they had. At one point, Parker’s dad had poked his head into the room and asked if they were hungry yet, to which both of them replied they weren’t. Parker’s dad closed the door and Parker flipped over onto her back.

“Can we take a break? My brain hurts,” she asked Dylan, who was still studiously looking at his Trigonometry textbook.

“I thought you just said you weren’t hungry.” He responded without looking up from what he was reading.

“I’m not. I don’t want a food break, I just want a break-break.” She rolled off of her bed and stretched in a way that was very familiar to that of a feline. Dylan laughed at the way she stretched and closed his textbook.

“Alright, I could go for a break-break too, I guess.” He laid on the floor next to where she ended up after stretching. Parker was laying on her back and staring up at the ceiling. Dylan laid down next to her so his head was next to hers, but his legs were facing the opposite direction.

The room was quiet for a minute; the only sounds being the light pitter-patter of rain on the roof, just outside the bedroom window, and the breaths of the two bodies lying on the floor.

“Thank you,” Parker broke the silence, confusing Dylan in the process.

“‘Thank you?’ Thank you for what?” Dylan adjusted his head so he could look at her face, but she was still facing towards the ceiling.

“I don’t know if I ever said it, but thank you for making me feel welcome that first time we met.” She finally made eye contact with him.

Dylan chuckled and shook his head, “Parker, you’ve thanked me multiple times. It really was my pleasure, you don’t have to keep thanking me.”

“No, I know,” Parker sighed. “It’s just... I was really feeling down about moving here and being the new kid in school in the middle of the year. I thought I was going to really struggle to make friends and never have any reason to leave the house or have people over. I didn’t want to leave my best friend back home. We’ve been friends since we were in elementary school so the idea of starting somewhere new and completely foreign without her by my side was so incredibly daunting and terrifying that I didn’t

want to do it. Starting at a new school, especially half way through the year is already hard enough, but leaving behind her and my other friends made it way worse. I never wanted to move here, so I really wasn't looking forward to having to start over. And you made starting over really easy just by being kind, by being yourself. And it meant a lot to me then, and it still means a lot to me now. So really, thank you Dylan. Thank you for being one of the best friends I have ever had."

"You know, I think that's the most open you've been with me in the last two months of knowing each other. I didn't know you were so worried."

"I really don't like to bother people with stuff that in the end won't matter."

"Parker, that definitely matters."

Parker just shrugged in response, which looked a little funny since she was on the floor, but Dylan knew better than to laugh even a little bit in such a tense and honest moment.

Dylan sat up so he could see her better. "You're allowed to feel things, you know. Yes, feelings can get in the way, and don't always justify actions and anything else you may be feeling, but your feelings are valid, and you should let yourself feel them. Just don't dwell on them.

"Also, I'm quite honored to be considered such a good friend. I have to say, Scott technically is my best friend, but you come in a pretty close second." He smiled to let her know that he was trying to help diffuse the tension.

Parker really wanted to say something sarcastic because that was her defense mechanism when it came to serious and potentially emotional talks, but she didn't want Dylan to think poorly of her, and she knew he was right, so she just nodded and said,

“Okay, thank you,” barely audible. But Dylan heard her, and she knew he heard her, because he smiled.

“Good. So, speaking of Scott,” Dylan twisted his back trying to pop it, with no success, “when are we going to talk about you and him?”

Parker’s cheeks immediately jumped in temperature. “Me and Scott? I don’t know what you’re talking about; there is no me and Scott.”

Dylan rolled his eyes so hard that they looked like they were going to pop out of his head. “Oh *please!* It is so obvious that the two of you like each other. Literally everyone can tell. I’m sure even the librarian knows.”

“Even if that was true, which it isn’t, I highly doubt the librarian would know!” Parker frowned.

“You can tell me! Didn’t you just refer to me as the ‘one of the best friends you’ve ever had?’ I think that means you can tell me anything.”

Parker flipped over so her face was buried in her floor and groaned. It was an unnecessarily long, and overly dramatic groan; probably the most dramatic groan Parker could muster.

“Wow, for someone who isn’t dramatic, you can be *really* dramatic.” Dylan noted.

“Okay fine, yes I like Scott.” Parker said this out loud, sort of. The problem was that her face was still shoved into the carpet, so the words came out so muffled that Dylan had no idea what she had said.

“I’m sorry? Do you care to repeat that?”

Parker lifted her head up but didn't want to look Dylan in the eye, so she just kept her eyes shut. "Yes, I like Scott. Happy?" She let her head flop back down.

"Yes, actually. You guys would be so cute together."

"Hold on. We don't know if Scott even likes me."

"Dude, are you daft? It's completely obvious." When Parker didn't look convinced, Dylan continued, "First of all, have you seen the way he looks at you? He's always beaming when you're around. And, he always picks you up for movie night, or is the first one to your house if you're hosting. *And*, he's always looking forward to Chemistry, since the two of you are partners. *And—*"

"Okay! Okay, I get it." Parker cut him off. "Technically though, that doesn't automatically mean that he likes me."

Now it was Dylan's turn to groan. "You guys are going to be the death of me."

"You guys?" Obviously I can tell why when it comes to me, but what has Scott done?"

"He refuses to say anything to you, the same way you refuse to believe me. Ergo, your stubbornness, and his scaredy-cat-ness, are going to be the death of me."

Parker laughed, "Well, now look who's being dramatic. Whatever. I don't know about you, but I'm hungry now. Let's go find out what my dad wants to do for dinner."

Dylan tried to say something but considering his mouth was full to the brim with chow mien, it came out garbled and unintelligible.

Parker couldn't help but laugh, and unlike Dylan, her mouth wasn't full of food so she was able to speak fine: "I'm sorry, do you want to try that again once your mouth is empty of Chinese noodles?"

Dylan chuckled—well, as well as any person could chuckle with their mouth full of food—in response, and nodded.

Finally, he spoke. "Why is your room so bare?"

"What do you mean?" Parker raised an eyebrow.

"Your room. It's plain. Bare, boring, empty, not anything like you in any way, shape, or form. The complete and utter opposite of you, if you ask me. Which you obviously didn't but I'm giving you my opinion anyway."

"I don't know, it just is. Does it matter?" Parker shrugged and was suddenly much more intrigued by the food in front of her than she had been a moment before.

Dylan's eyebrows furrowed, "I think it rather does actually. I think a room can say a lot about a person, and I think you're the kind of person that a lot can be said about. So the fact that you have a room that says nothing about you despite being a person who should be talked about all the time feels wrong. Why don't you have any pictures of Washington? Of where you grew up, or friends from there? Any trinkets from family or shops or memories of good days?"

“It’s just still in a box.” Parker stood up from the table and dumped what little was left of her food into the trash. “In my closet. I haven’t had time to unpack it yet. It wasn’t important so it wasn’t the first thing to get unpacked.”

Dylan stood up and looked her in the eye, which proved more difficult than it should’ve because that’s exactly what she was trying to avoid, “Parker, you’ve been unpacked for almost two months. You even told me that you had finished unpacking everything before school started.”

Parker’s body seemed to weigh so much more than before as she dragged herself up the stairs with Dylan close behind.

“I’d say I’m not trying to pry, but we both know that’s a big, fat lie and that I am trying to pry into what is going on because I know you well enough at this point to know that these walls should be covered in the most random assortment of things one has ever seen. You’re so colourful! Not just your wardrobe--which is a good amount of colourful, don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying you’re Rainbow Brite or anything. But your personality. You’re incredibly kind and despite being nervous and sometimes skeptical, you’re always finding the best in people even when they don’t necessarily deserve the benefit of the doubt. Like how you were with Renae at the beginning. And your room reflects none of the personality that you have so much of. So I say, why is everything so bare?” Dylan asked again once they were in Parker’s room again and the door was shut.

“Because it hurts,” Parker said it so quietly that Dylan wasn’t sure she had said anything at all.

“What do you mean ‘it hurts’?”

“I mean that I never wanted to leave Washington, and it hurt when I did. And it still hurts. And looking at all the stuff that I had in my room there hurt so I haven’t put it out yet. Aurora is nice, and meeting y’all so quickly was the best thing that could’ve happened, but I never actually wanted to come here.”

“Things are allowed to hurt, Park. That means they mattered; that they still, to some extent, matter.” Dylan stood up and outstretched his hand to Parker.

Parker looked at it quizzically, but didn’t take it. “What are you doing?”

“*We* are going somewhere. So, c’mon.” He pulled Parker to her feet, then stopped. “Wait, do you think your dad will let you use the car?”

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“So, why are we at Target?” Parker was standing on the cart with her feet on the bar and her arms clutched to the sides as Dylan pulled the cart, and therefore her, along with him down the aisles.

“I mean, first of all, it’s Target. Second, we’re going to fix your bare walls. Get you some new things to go with your old things and make you less sad.”

“No, of course, what was I thinking? Shopping makes everything better.” Parker rolled her eyes.

“Have you ever heard of retail therapy?” Dylan asked, not really wanting an answer.

For the next hour, Dylan pulled Parker around the store as she clung to the shopping cart and helped Dylan pick out picture frames and strings of lights and anything else that was cute and inexpensive that she deemed acceptable.



Once they left Target and got back to Parker's house, they spent the rest of the evening making her room resemble her, like Dylan thought it should. Despite feeling hesitant to put anything on her walls, by the end of the night, Parker was in love with how her room looked, and told Dylan over and over how grateful she was that he made her do all of that.

They were sitting next to each other on the floor, admiring their handy work; pictures from Parker's old life were hung up, mostly things of family trips and some old birthday pictures. There were some of Parker and her cousins at Christmas or at the beach. There were some old ticket stubs--movies, concerts, the Space Needle, and other monument types--random pieces of art that Parker drew herself, or picked up from thrift shops or garage sales.

Parker stood up and held out her hand to Dylan who took it and used it to pull himself up. "Thanks for this, Dylan. I definitely needed it."

"You've already thanked me, so again I will say, you don't need to thank me. I'm glad it's made you happy, and I hope you feel a little more at home here now."

"I really do," Parker smiled. "Now let's go so I can take you home. It's late and I want to sleep."

“So, are you going to talk to him?” Dylan had barely sat down in his seat in homeroom before he looked over at Parker.

“Okay, it’s much too early for such conversation topics,” Parker squinted at Dylan. She was fully dressed and ready for the day, but one could look at her and easily see that she was exhausted.

Dylan frowned, “Why do you look more tired than normal? I mean, you always look tired, but more so today.”

“Ha-ha, thanks for that. I was up late. Couldn’t sleep, I guess.”

“Oh, too much on your mind?” Dylan gave her a knowing look, which in return she glared at.

“It may be too early, and I may be feeling tired, but don’t think I won’t make you pay for that face you have there, you little gremlin.”

“‘Little gremlin,’ that one’s new.” Dylan chuckled. Parker wanted to retort, but class had begun so she was forced to hold her tongue.

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That was until class was over, and they were in the hallway, and Parker no longer had to hold her retort in.

“Why have you got to be so annoying sometimes?”

“I’m not annoying! I just want to see my two favorite people together and be happy. Just let me be your matchmaker.”

They had paused in the hallway; their next classes in different directions.

“No! I don’t need a matchmaker.” Dylan pouted. “Look, I’m not against dating him, but if it is going to happen, I would like for it to happen in its own time, not because my friend pushes it to happen. It won’t be as genuine.”

At that, Dylan was ready to admit defeat. “Okay, that’s fair. I’ll leave it be then. I guess.” He dramatically sighed and walked off toward the gym.

Parker headed towards Pre-Calc, and only slightly faltered when she remembered that Dylan and Scott had PE together, and that there was no way Dylan was going to be capable of keeping his mouth shut.

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The rest of the day went like any other; Parker did her best to act normal, especially around Scott. She really didn’t want anything tipping him off that there was even a potential that things had changed, just in case Dylan had actually managed to not say anything. While she doubted it, there was always a chance.

Chemistry felt normal; Parker and Scott laughed whenever a joke was made, just like normal; nothing was inflated or bogus about it.

Lunch was also easy; easier, in fact since the whole group was there.

“So, whose week is it to host movie night?” Lucas asked once everyone was present and accounted for.

“Well, I hosted last week,” Parker piped up before popping a grape in her mouth.

“Okay, so that means it’s Scott’s turn, yeah?” Dylan chimed in.

Renaë just nodded, her mouth full of sandwich.

Scott looked up, like he hadn't been paying attention to a word any of us had been saying, "Sorry, what? I spaced out, didn't catch any of that."

"Movie night. Friday. Your House." Parker filled him in between chewing, which made everyone laugh. And everyone laughing caused her to almost choke and spit out her food. Once she was able to breathe again, she just looked up and said, "Oh, yes, thanks guys. Thanks for making me almost choke. I'm totally fine, by the way."

"Uhm, excuse you, none of us can *make* you do anything," Renae said sarcastically, earning giggles from Dylan, Scott, and Lucas, and an outstretched tongue from Parker.

"But, yeah Scott, you good to host this weekend?" Lucas asked.

"Oh, totally." Scott smiled.

"What had you so distracted anyway?" Renae asked.

Scott blushed, and Dylan smirked, which no one seemed to catch onto except for Parker, and she kept her mouth shut.

"Oh, just class later." He didn't stammer, but his cheeks were still pink. No one seemed to believe him, but no one pressed any further.

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"You know, you're hosting tonight. You didn't have to come and get me; I could've gotten a ride from one of the others." Parker was in the passenger seat of Scott's mom's car. Parker's mom was in need of the car again, and truthfully, even if she hadn't been, it had become somewhat of a routine for Scott to pick her up. Which neither protested against.

“I know, but it really isn’t that big of a deal. You live so close, plus it’s pretty much a tradition now.” Scott smiled and Parker knew the smile was for her even though he didn’t take his eyes off of the road.

“I don’t know if this is the sort of thing you would call tradition instead of something more along the lines of a habit, but nonetheless, I appreciate it. Thank you. So, what movie are we going to watch?”

“I was thinking of letting you pick. We could go through some different options when we get to my house, if you want.”

Parker’s eyes grew wider. “I mean, I’m definitely willing to help and give an opinion, but you know I don’t like deciding things.”

Scott laughed, “I know, I know. Fine, you can help me decide. And I’ll be the final vote. How does that sound?”

“Yeah, alright. That works for me.”

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Scott’s house resembled that of a two-story townhome; it even had the yard to match. The front yard was a small patch of green grass with a tree in the middle that stood at about ten feet tall, though it was not all that thick around. Past the yard, closer to the house, was a flowerbed that sat right in front of the porch. The flowerbed was bare—except for the lone small, red weeping willow—since the weather hadn’t warmed up very much yet.

Scott led Parker inside, and even though she had been over multiple times before, the open style of the entryway always captivated her. It wasn’t even very big; it was just that when you walked in, the entryway almost immediately opened up into the living—which had a vaulted ceiling—and it gave the illusion of being bigger than it actually was.

Both the living room and the entryway were flooded in warm light that made the house extremely warm and welcoming feeling. Though, Parker attributed that feeling to the numerous candles Scott's mom always had lit around the house. Between the candles, and Scott's mom's baking habits, it always smelt like some delicious, sweet baked treat.

The first time Parker went to Scott's house, he had asked her if candles, or any strong smells, bothered her. She had been confused by his question, though answered him no, until she got to his house and saw that his mother was a candle fanatic—a good candle fanatic, of course, but a candle fanatic, nonetheless.

Parker loved going to Scott's house because of how welcome she always felt. Not just because of the lighting, or the smells, but because of Scott and his parents. They were some of the nicest people Parker had ever met, and from the moment she stepped into the house the first time, Scott's mom had taken to Parker like never before.

When Parker and Scott walked into the house this time, it was no different. The moment Scott's mom—who insisted that Parker call her Patricia—saw them, she was all over Parker.

“Oh, you're here!” She rushed into the entryway to hug them both, giving Parker an extra-long one, which made Scott grin behind her back.

“Haha, hi Mrs. Russell—” Parker was immediately cut off.

“Oh Parker, how many times do I have to tell you? Please just call me Patricia.”

“I'm sorry, I know.” Parker smiled, which apparently warranted another hug.

“Okay mom, we have to pick out a movie. Everyone else is going to be here soon.” Scott did his best to usher the three of them into the living room.

“Okay, I’m sorry! I’m just making some snacks for you and your friends. I’ll go finish that up, and then I’ll be upstairs if any of you need anything.”

“Thank you so much, *Patricia*.” Parked emphasized her name, sharing a smile.

“Oh, anything for you.” Patricia smiled once more, before disappearing into the kitchen.

Parker sat on the floor next to Scott who was scanning DVD cases and had a big black disc notebook spread out on the floor in front of him.

“I really like your mom,” Parker said as she sat down. “She’s just so sweet.”

“Yeah, well, she really likes you too. Talks about you all the time, actually.”

Parker thought Scott might have blushed when he said that, but she attributed it to a glare of the lighting or something.

“So,” Scott changed the subject, “any kind of movie you’re in the mood for?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I told you, I’m not good at this.” Parker frowned.

“I know, but you have to have some kind of opinion.” Scott laughed and booped her on the nose. She swatted at his hand, but with no real fervor.

“If I have to have some sort of opinion, I guess something that is a mix?

Something a bit funny, with action, and who can say no to romance?” Parker tried her best to keep her face straight, but was internally smirking, thinking she had bested him by giving him three different genres to try and cover with one movie. But Scott was decent at thinking on his toes, and pulled out of the cabinet slim DVD case, handing it to Parker.

She read the cover aloud, “‘This Means War’.”

“Yeah, how ‘bout it? Covers all the things; romance, comedy, and action.”

Parker scoffed, “I guess I really can’t argue with that. Well done, sir.”

“Why thank you, ma’am,” he bowed jokingly, awkwardly, and Parker laughed and shoved him.

“Excuse you, if my mom is too young to be a ma’am—which is what she says whenever anyone calls her that—then I am most definitely too young to be a ma’am.” She got up from where she was sitting on the ground and walked over to the couch, plopping down.

Scott followed, sarcastically saying, “Oh, my deepest apologies, miss. How inconsiderate of me.”

Parker smiled, and responded with a, “Much better,” before swinging her feet up onto the couch across Scott’s lap. Without even thinking about it, he laid his hand on her calf and pulled her legs closer.

Everyone else arrived a few minutes later and took up spots on the couch. No one argued with the movie choice, and Patricia brought out the snacks she had prepared, just like she had promised; freshly baked chocolate chip cookies, and a big bowl of pretzels. She loved to bake, and normally she would test out any new recipes she found on Scott and his friends, but she hadn’t found anything new recently so this week she stuck with the classic.

“Oh Patricia, you spoil us!” Dylan gushed, with his mouth half-full of cookie.

Patricia chuckled, “Anything for you lot.” And with that, she vanished up the stairs, leaving the kids to watch their movie.



“Hey, Parker!”

Parker turned around at the sound of her name to Scott walk-jogging up to her.

“Oh, hi Scott. What’s up?”

Last period had just gotten out and Scott found Parker at her locker, packing up her backpack.

“I wanted to see if you wanted to come with Dylan and I to pick up his car from the auto shop, and then maybe grab something to eat after?”

“I’d love to, but whose driving?” Parker closed her locker and started to walk with Scott toward the double doors that led outside to the student parking lot.

Scott opened the door for Parker and let her walk through before following. “I am. My mom didn’t have to work today so I have the car.”

“Well, sounds great to me. I was going to take the bus home so this is definitely better.”

“Still no luck on finding a new car?”

Parker shrugged, “Not totally, but I think I found a possible contender. My dad and I are going to go check it out this weekend.”

“Finally, took you two long enough.” Dylan was already waiting for them at the car, and was eager for Scott to open it up since despite Aurora starting to defrost, it was still a bit chilly out.

Scott unlocked the car and the three of them got in; Parker in the back and the boys in the front. Dylan explained that the auto shop was about twenty minutes away from school and that everything was taken care of; he just needed to get the keys from the front desk when they got there, and he was good to go.

The drive there was uneventful and peaceful. Parker spent the majority of the time staring out the window while listening to the music coming from Scott's phone that he had plugged into the stereo. The weather was bright and shining, despite the chill that flew through the air. Aurora reminded Parker a lot of home; suburbia with a lot of greenery and trees, something she loved about home and was learning to love about here. It wasn't the same of course, but it was close and comforting, nonetheless. There wasn't anything about the environment of Aurora that Parker didn't like; it was just what she was used to and what she had grown to love over the years. But especially on nice and chilly days like this one, she missed home just a little bit extra. Maybe it was the fact that western Washington had just about any geological climate one could want within hours of each other. Or maybe it's just that she grew up liking it and didn't know how to like anything else.

Parker had spent so much time following the lines of the road out the window that she was surprised when they pulled up to the auto shop and it felt as though barely any time had passed.

Dylan turned to her and Scott before hopping out of the car, "I'm going to finish everything up here and then I'll meet y'all at McNeil's, so go ahead and get a table without me." He opened the door and got out, "I'll see you guys there." He grabbed his backpack and headed up to the office.

Parker climbed into the front seat, almost hitting Scott in the head with her foot in the process.

“Hey now, watch the head. I only have so many brain cells to spare.” Scott laughed.

Parker looked up sheepishly, “Sorry, I didn’t feel like getting out of the car and getting back in.”

“It’s all good; no harm, no foul.” Scott took the car out of park and turned around down the road they came from.

McNeil’s was a diner that was about five minutes from where Scott and Parker both lived, and it was Parker’s new favourite spot since moving there. The five of them went there often, sometimes in the wee hours of the morning. It was the kind of place that had a little bit of everything. Maybe because it was a local joint that wasn’t owned by a big, ugly corporation, or maybe because everyone who worked there was so nice, but one always felt the friendly environment the second they walked in. In a way, it was a place that made all who ate there feel at home, just a little bit.

Scott pulled into a parking spot in the first row, right by the door, and they both climbed out of the car. Scott held the diner door open for Parker and they walked in, taking a seat at their normal both on the right side of the restaurant.

One of the waitresses came over to take their drink orders, and they decided to wait for Dylan before actually ordering any food.

After about twenty minutes of just aimless chatting and laughing, Dylan still hadn’t shown up or contacted either of them.

“Any idea what’s taking Dylan so long?” Parker asked, looking around with a slightly concerned look on her face.

Scott just shrugged. “No clue.”

Parker pulled out her phone to shoot Dylan a text.

*Where are you?*

A few moments later, his response came in, only consisting of: ;)

It took Parker approximately two point three seconds to understand what it meant. “I’m going to throw something at him,” she said slightly under her breath, but Scott still managed to hear her.

“Why are we throwing things at Dylan?”

Parker had a mental war in her head about whether or not she should show him the text from Dylan that felt like it went on for an hour, when in reality it was only a few seconds, before she flipped her phone around for Scott to see.

She watched his eyes widen ever so slightly as he most likely came to the same realization as she did. They both sat there quietly as they processed exactly what was going on. While Scott continued to have a bit of a dumbstruck look on his face, Parker waved their waitress over.

“What can I get you guys?” she asked.

“Chicken-fried steak for him, and I’ll take a short stack,” Parker smiled at the waitress as she nodded and walked away to take their order to the kitchen. She directed her attention towards Scott, “You going to be okay there?”

He chuckled, just a little bit, “Yeah. I guess I’m just surprised I didn’t catch on earlier to what he was trying to pull.”

“Yeah, honestly, I don’t know how I didn’t catch on either. It’s not like it was something I needed to go to or anything.”

“True; and it was originally supposed to be him and me, and he suggested I invite you along and that we could come here afterwards.”

“Do you think it’s kind of silly that we haven’t really addressed what seems to be obvious enough that Dylan felt the need to set this whole thing up?” The words that tumbled out of Parker’s mouth were rushed and jumbled and didn’t really make a whole lot of sense to her when she thought about it afterward.

Scott didn’t say anything for a second; he just looked at her, like he was trying to decipher what exactly she had said. “Hey, Parker.”

“Yes?” confusion tinged her voice.

“I like you. A lot. And I think that it’s time I tell you and that we do something about it, if you feel the same way.”

A smile spread across Parker’s face. “Hey, Scott. I like you too. And I agree, we should do something about it. Any ideas?”

Scott nodded, “Yes, my first idea being this should be our first date, if that’s acceptable to you.”

Parker nodded just as their food arrived at their table. They both thanked the waitress, and after she walked away, Parker said, “I think this would be a lovely first date.”

They ate and laughed and talked just like they normally would anytime before this, but there was an air of comfort that was new. Like they weren’t tiptoeing around a secret that both of them knew, but neither would admit to.

When they were finished, they both paid for their food--Scott tried to pay for Parker's, but she refused, saying that this wasn't even originally supposed to be a date and that she would never expect that and whatever else she needed to say to get Scott to let it go--and Scott drove her home.

She hugged Scott before getting out of the car, and he smiled at her, and as she was walking up to her front door she was both weirdly happy and sad that he hadn't tried to kiss her.

Somehow, as soon as she got up to her room and put her bag away and changed into her comfy, at home clothes, she received a text from Dylan.

*So?*

She rolled her eyes and responded, *You're the best/worst best friend ever, and I hope you know that.*

*Oh, I know. ;)*

She laughed to herself and put her phone down before opening up her Chemistry book.

“Ain’t she pretty?” Parker held out her arms and showed off her new car to Dylan.

Dylan laughed and shook her head. “Let me guess, you named her?”

“Well, yeah!”

“And what might her name be?”

Parker grinned, “Grace. Named after Grace O’Malley, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Irish warrior Pirate Queen. She was amazing and badass, and I thought it only best to name this beauty after her.”

“I think *beauty* is a stretch,” Dylan sarcastically grimaced, which in turn caused Parker to punch him in the arm.

Grace was a forest green, 1992 Jeep Wrangler that definitely held true to her age. The tan soft top was faded from years in the sun and snow, and the paint—while not peeling or chipped—wasn’t shiny and new looking. She wasn’t overly scratched or dinged, but she wasn’t gleaming.

“How dare you! She is a beauty! Women are not only worth what they look like, and that goes for cars as well. Do I need to lecture you?” Parker crossed her arms in full-on “mom” mode.

“No, no, no. I’m sorry, you’re right. Women are amazing and looks aren’t important.” Dylan’s eyes were wide with genuine intimidation and his hands were held up in front of him, as if they would protect him from Parker’s potential onslaught of words.

“Good. Anyway, you don’t get to complain. Because now I have a car. So you’re no longer the only one with a car, which means life is easier for all involved! Now, get in.” Parker climbed into the driver’s seat, leaving Dylan to scramble for the passenger seat.

“Wait, where are we going? I thought we were going to study?” Dylan buckled his seatbelt, despite his confusion.

“Excuse you, have you looked outside? It’s much too nice out to stay inside studying. We are young, and therefore we really shouldn’t be wasting all of our time studying. We should be living, we should be outside, especially on days like today.” Parker grinned, turned her key in the ignition, and threw the car into reverse, maneuvering out of her driveway and onto the road.

“That still didn’t answer my question.”

“You’ll just have to wait and see.”

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Thirty minutes later Parker and Dylan pulled up into a parking lot and climbed out of the car. The sun was still shining and it was the warmest it had been in a while, and with Parker being the person she was, that meant a trip to the beach. At least, it would’ve back home, so if it was doable here, then it would be done. And doable it was.

She had driven them to the Cherry Creek Reservoir which had a lovely little beach on one end of it. While it wasn’t the freezing cold Pacific Ocean Parker had grown up her whole life knowing, it was what they had available, so she would make it work.

“Oh wow,” Dylan was staring at the beach in front of them, “I haven’t been here since I was a kid.”



“Really? It’s not like it’s very far from us.” Parker grabbed a bag out of her trunk, threw it over her shoulder, and started walking.

Dylan kept on her heels, “Yeah, I guess. I don’t know. It’s just one of those places we came to a lot when I was really young, but stopped over the years. No particular reason, at least, none that I can think of.”

Parker nodded, “Yeah, I get that. That’s how my family was, but as soon as I could drive, I started going back to the beach whenever I could. It was a nice place to people-watch and read, especially if it was actually warm out, which didn’t happen often until summer.”

“Does it really rain there as much as people say it does?”

She laughed and shook her head, “It really doesn’t. It sprinkles a lot, which is why people say it rains ‘all the time.’ But in reality, we still have really hot and sunny summers. And fun fact of the day, Houston gets a higher annual rainfall than Seattle does. They just tend to get it all at once.”

“Honestly, that is not something I would’ve ever guessed, but I’m almost not surprised that is a fact that you happen to know,” Dylan smiled.

They walked along the beach for a minute or two before Dylan asked, “Where are you taking me? You’re not going to murder me, are you?”

Parker chuckled, “Nah, if I was going to do that, I would’ve done it a long time ago. And don’t worry, I’ve been here before. It’s somewhere I’ve been wanting to show you, and since it’s such a nice day out, I figured it was the perfect day to do that.”

They walked for another minute or so before the beach sharply curved around a small bend and behind the curve was a little outcropping of rocks that was perfectly

situated to have a few people sit underneath. Somehow, it was completely unseen from the rest of the beach; the kind of thing that unless you knew it was there, you probably wouldn't find it.

Parker pulled a blanket out of her bag and laid it on the flat stone that came up out of the sand before sitting down on it and gesturing for Dylan to join her.

“Okay, how the heck did you find this?” Dylan gave Parker an impressed smile.

“Oh, if I tell you, then I'll definitely have to kill you.” Parker grinned and leaned back on her elbows, crossing her ankles over each other.

They stayed there until the sun started to set. Parker wanted to stay and watch it, but Dylan reminded her that, “Unless you have a flashlight in that bag, we won't be able to easily find our way across the beach. And they also start locking the parking lot gates at dusk, so we should probably go to avoid getting locked in.”

“Okay, yeah, you're right. But sometime soon we're going to come back and watch the sunset. Deal?”

Dylan smiled, “Deal.”

“Can we be done with pictures? My face hurts from smiling so much.” Parker rubbed at her cheeks, right where her dimples sat. “I don’t like smiling.”

Both Scott and Dylan turned to her and looked at her like she had grown a second head.

“What?” she asked.

“‘Don’t like to smile.’ I’m sorry, but I can’t remember a time when you didn’t have a smile on your face,” said Dylan.

“Seriously, Park. You’re almost always smiling. Maybe not the way you do for pictures, because your smile does get a little cheesy in pictures, but you almost always have a smile on your face.”

“Oh, thanks for calling me cheesy, Scott.”

Scott grinned and planted a kiss on the top of her head, “Oh, you know I love your cheesy picture grin.”

Renae grabbed Parker’s arm and gently pulled her away from Scott and Dylan. “Okay, we can be done once you and I get some pictures together because I swear none exist.”

Parker laughed, “Okay, yeah you’re right. I think there might be a random one or two that exist in the depths of someone’s phone. Alright, alright, let’s be cute then.”

Lucas took some cute pictures of the two girls, smiling, laughing, acting silly. At one point, Renae got on Parker’s back. Slowly, Dylan and Scott made their way into the

pictures too, until Parker insisted they set the camera on an autotimer and that Lucas joined them.

“You know I don’t like having my picture taken,” Lucas groaned and Parker dragged him to where they all were standing.

“I know, I know. But please, just a few. We can’t have no pictures with you, Lucas. I want to be able to look back on these years from now, in case we’re not all friends, and remember everyone was here. Because who ever remembers who was behind the camera, right?”

“Fine, just for you. Also, way to be a downer, Park.” Lucas shook his head.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry. Just, I love you all so much, and you never know what could happen. So, let’s take something that will make us smile when we’re old, no matter where we are in this world, sound good?”

Everyone nodded and smiled with their arms around each other. Multiple were taken that way, and when Parker looked at them later on her phone, she couldn’t help but smile, and acknowledge how grateful she was that these four people were in her life.

Her favourite picture was probably the one that was the five of them, and Dylan had just told some stupid joke. You could tell by the smug look on his face. Parker was rolling her eyes, Scott was clapping Dylan on the back and laughing; Lucas was trying hard to suppress his smile, and Renae had her head in her hands. It really encapsulated the group’s dynamic in the best way possible, and Parker knew it was the kind of picture she would look back on later and remember everything fondly.

The Spring State Fair had come to Denver, and one day at lunch Renae had suggested that when the weekend came, they should all go. So as soon as Saturday rolled

around, they all piled in Grace and made the thirty minute drive to where the fair was being held.

They had all spent the day eating fair food, playing unwinnable games, and riding the few rides they had set up, like the ferris wheel and the merry-go-round. Anytime there was a potential picture moment, Renae and Parker took turns making them all stop and take pictures. And as much as the boys would complain, secretly, they really didn't mind and in fact, rather enjoyed it.

It was nearing evening and the fairgrounds were winding down as the five of them were getting ready to leave. Something at the last second caught Scott's eye and he grabbed Parker's hand, telling the rest of them that they would be right back.

Parker half-jogged alongside Scott who was still holding her hand. Laughing, she asked, "Okay, where are you taking me, you weirdo?"

Scott stopped jogging and slowed down to a walk, readjusting his grip on Parker's hand to be less "follow me" and more just softly holding her hand. "First of all, weirdo? Ouch." Parker laughed as his fake offended face. "Second, ta-da!" Scott gestured to a booth that they had stopped at. It was the fair game where you had to throw the balls and knock down the metal cans.

"Yes, it's a cheesy and impossible to win carnival game. What's so 'ta-da' about it?" Parker turned to look at Scott and he just pointed at one of the prizes hanging at the top of the booth. It was a big, fluffy hedgehog plush. "Oh wait, that's so cute!" Parker's favourite animal was a hedgehog and she had a small hedgehog plush that lived on her bed.

Scott paid the person working at the booth for one attempt; three balls, one ball per stack of cans. Parker completely expected Scott to not be able to knock them all down, just much to her amazement, one try was all he needed. Within minutes, they were walking back to the others, the large hedgehog plush wrapped up in Parker's arms and a big smile on her face.

Dylan, Lucas, and Renae were all waiting at the car as Parker and Scott were walking up to it. Dylan spotted them first, his eyes immediately going to the hedgehog in Parker's arms. "Ah, so that's what this was all about. How many attempts did it take you to win that, huh? What, like ten?"

Parker shook her head and answered for the two of them, "Dude, he did it in one. I'm still shocked. I was expecting it to be like those scenes in the movies where the boyfriend tries like fifteen times to no avail and ends up just trying to pay the fair worker for the stuffed animal."

Everyone laughed and climbed into the car, Parker and Scott in the front, and the rest of them in the back.

"I see how it is, you have no faith in me," Scott said with a smirk plastered on his face.

"At that moment, I definitely didn't." Parker started up the car and maneuvered her way out of the parking lot and onto the main road that would lead them all home.

Scott leaned over to her and in a quieter voice said, "So, did you just call me your boyfriend?"

Parker's cheeks reddened and she looked at Scott out of the corner of her eye and winked, a small giggle escaping her mouth. She held out her hand for Scott to take and he did, placing a kiss on the back of it.

Simultaneously, all three voices in the back grounded. "Get a room you two!" Renae yelled, and everyone couldn't help but laugh.

There was a knock at the front door and Parker came almost tumbling down the stairs to answer it. Scott was standing on the front porch, his smile widening as he saw Parker open the door.

Parker's dad came out of the kitchen. "Hi, Scott," they shook hands. "Little early for movie night, isn't it?"

"Yeah, we're doing things a little different this week," Scott responded.

"We're all going to see a movie, but Scott wanted to take me somewhere first."

Parker shrugged since she didn't know where Scott was going to take her.

Her dad raised his eyebrow and Scott scrambled to say, "Nothing bad, I promise."

"Alright, well, be safe you two. And tell the rest of your friends I said hi,"

Parker's dad smiled and waved them out the door.

"Will do, dad! Love you!" Parker hugged him before running down the steps after Scott and jumping into the passenger seat of his mom's car. They buckled their seatbelts and Scott started driving in the direction of where the movie theater was that they were supposed to be meeting everyone at in a few hours.

"So, where exactly are you taking me, hmm?" Parker turned to look at Scott and rest her chin on her hand.

"It's a surprise, silly goose," Scott smiled. "You just have to wait and see. Don't worry, you won't have to wait for long." He followed up after he saw her pouting.



“Oh, fine.” Parker slumped back in defeat, faking her displeasure. In reality, she adored that he wanted to surprise her with something and truly couldn’t be upset about it.

It was a nice day out; the clouds were few and far between, and while it still wasn’t the warmest the year had to offer, it wasn’t freezing and one could be outside with a jacket on without suffering too much.

The drive wasn’t very long; Scott pulled into a parking lot that Parker didn’t recognise and parked. They both got out of the car and Parker followed Scott towards a small building at the front of the lot. As they were walking Scott looked at her and offered his hand, which she happily took and interlocked her fingers in.

As they got closer to the building, Parker could finally see exactly what the place they were at was.

“Mini golfing?”

Scott nodded, “Yeah, I thought it would be fun. You don’t hate mini golfing, do you?”

“No, actually, I love it.” Parker smiled.

They walked in through the double doors and got their golf clubs and golf balls and headed out the back wall that was a garage-like door that stayed open during business hours. It let right out into the mini golf course.

They worked their way through the eighteen holes of mini golf that were laid out before them. Someone was constantly either knocking their ball off course or getting it stuck somewhere it shouldn’t be; the pond that was sat in the middle of all of the holes, or way off in the grass where the course didn’t even go.

At about hole twelve, when it was Scott's turn to go, Parker looked down at the scorecard and looked back up, "I guess it's good we both really suck at mini golf. There's no room for competition."

Scott laughed, "Yeah, it's hard to get into a competitive mindset when we both really, really suck at this." He hit his ball nowhere near the hole and Parker laughed and walked up to him. He put his arm around her shoulder and looked down at her. "You still like me even though I suck, right?"

She nodded, "As long as my lack of skill isn't ridiculously unappealing to you."

"If anything, I like you even more now." Scott shook his head and leaned down to kiss her, which she happily accepted.

"Alright, let's go get your ball so we can finish this up and meet everyone for the movie." She laughed and pulled him towards where his ball had gone, which was the complete opposite way of the hole.

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They pulled up to the theater about fifteen minute before the movie was about to start and found everyone waiting for them with their tickets already purchased.

"Wow, took you guys long enough," Renae piped up as soon as she saw them. They had all been waiting in the lobby on a bench for Scott and Parker to arrive.

"Sorry! We both suck at mini golfing so it honestly took a lot longer than it really should have." Parker hugged Renae, Dylan, and Lucas. "Are y'all ready then? We've been waiting forever." She giggled as Dylan lightly smacked her on the arm.

"Yeah, okay buddy. Let's go." Dylan led them all to the correct theater, and they took their seats. Movie night always took place at someone's house, but this time around

Lucas suggested that maybe they go out for a movie for once, and immediately everyone loved the idea.

Parker looked up what movies were playing at that local theater, and they all agreed on some action comedy that honestly sounded like it could either be really interesting, or really stupid.

At the end of the day though, they all really enjoyed the movie and it was just the right amount of stupid that made them all laughed until they almost cried.

They all walked out to the parking lot together and said their goodbyes before parting ways. Parker and Scott walked back to his car with his arm around her shoulder. They stopped when they got to the car and she looked up at him.

“What?” he asked.

“Thanks for a great day. Honestly, I had a lot of fun today.” She smiled up at him and he returned the look.

“Of course. Thank you for making it so fun.” He leaned down and kissed her once. “Now let’s get you back home so your dad doesn’t think that you’ve died or something.”

“Hey, Parker?” Dylan’s voice was barely above a whisper. They had gone so long with no words that somehow, Parker had forgotten she had the ability to speak.

“Yeah?” she responded, though—for a moment—he did not. Parker heard a slight shuffling near her ear, so she adjusted her head to see what it was only to find Dylan’s hand open and waiting. She slipped her hand in his, and once she did, he finally spoke.

“Do you remember when I said that Scott was my best friend, but you were a close second?”

Parker smiled, “Of course. You helped me decorate my room that night.”

Dylan was quiet again until, “I think you’ve surpassed Scott.”

Parker didn’t say anything, and Dylan didn’t expect her to. She just squeezed his hand a little tighter. They laid like that for a while, their backs on the blanket she laid out on the rock, their hands held together, both of them feeling like--in that moment--they were the only two people around. All they could hear was each other's breathing and the water moving, gentle, up and down the sand.

Everything was nice and peaceful for so long; they both almost fell asleep as the sky started to dim and the sun began to set. Parker felt Dylan jerk, ever so slightly.

“You good?” She turned to look at him just as a drop of water hit her in the eye. She squealed and sat up, rubbing at her eye, completely forgetting she had makeup on.

Dylan laughed and sat up too. “Yeah, that’s what made me jerk. I think it’s starting to rain.” Almost as if Dylan willed it into existence, the couple of droplets

multiplied until it was raining, and raining hard. They scrambled to get their stuff before booking it back to Grace and throwing everything in the back before throwing themselves into the front seats.

Laughing and soaked, Parker turned her key and started to drive. Wet strands of hair hung in each of their faces and they were shivering, considering there wasn't a dry spot on their clothes at all. Parker turned on the heat and even though her windshield wipers were on, she turned them onto their highest setting. Even still, she struggled to see out of the windshield in front of her.

“Did you still want to study?” Dylan asked.

Parker nodded, “Yeah, but I need to dry off first.”

“Well duh,” Dylan rolled his eyes, “you can just do that at my house. I have some extra clothes you can wear, easy.”

“Sweet, sounds good to me.” Parker turned onto a main road, instead of going straight like she would to take them to her house.

Parts of the road that didn't have good drainage were already starting to fill with water. Parker couldn't remember how long it had been since it rained this hard; she struggled to think of a time that it had rained this much at all since moving to Aurora. Even in Seattle it didn't rain hard like this very often. Stuff on the roads was getting washed up and whisked away, Parker could even see where the oil that had soaked in over the last few weeks since the last rain was starting to appear, it's rainbow slick glinting off the headlights.

The water on the roads was making it so Parker had to break a little bit harder than she normally did. She could feel Grace struggling to get the traction she usually had

on the road. The light ahead of them turned green before Parker really had to break at all and she silently let out a breath of relief; anxiety had been building in her, just a little bit, as they were approaching the light. But it left the second she saw it turn green.

The Jeep passed over the white line into the intersection, and that was when Parker heard the blaring horn and saw the bright high beams coming from her right side. She looked to her side and all she saw was Dylan's outline, framed by the oncoming headlights.

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Her heartbeat was in her ears. Unless it wasn't her heartbeat. Parker couldn't actually identify the beating she was hearing, or feeling. The sensation seemed to be everywhere and simultaneously nowhere.

A sharp smell invaded her nose and she wrinkled it, still not able to open her eyes or fully register what was going on around her. There was muffled talking, muffled beating and beeping, muffled everything. Nothing sounded real. She felt the urge to rub her nose, but she couldn't move her arms, or her hands. Nothing would move; no part of her body responded to her when she urged it to do what she wanted.

Pounding started to surface in her head, and things slowly became less muffled; she heard multiple different voices, and the beeping was sharper. Nothing in her body would respond to her yet, except her eyelids started to squirm. She urged them with everything she had to just open, but it wasn't that simple, because the second they let any light in, she flinched, and closed them tight again.

There was a soft voice near her head. "Hey, muffin."

Parker turned her head towards the voice and tried to open her eyes again, but it was still too bright. She tried to open her mouth to say that it was too bright, but nothing came out except a scratchy hiss.

The voice spoke again, “Don’t try to talk yet, or move. Don’t worry, you’re okay. I’m here, and I’m going to call for your nurse really quick, okay? I’ll be right back.” Parker didn’t respond, because she couldn’t. She just stayed where she was, motionless, until the voice returned, and a new voice was with it.

“Hi Parker, I’m Violet, your nurse. Your dad said you’re struggling to speak and open your eyes.” Violet slipped her hand into Parker’s. “Are you able to squeeze my hand as a response? Once for yes, twice for no.”

Parker squeezed her hand weakly one time.

“Good job. Okay, do you know where you are?”

Two squeezes.

“Okay. You’re at University of Colorado Hospital. Do you remember what happened?”

Two squeezes.

“You were in a car accident. Are you able to open your eyes?”

Two squeezes.

“Is it too bright?”

One squeeze.

“Okay, I’m going to turn down the lights and get you some water for when you’re ready for it, okay?”

One squeeze.

Violet slipped her hand out of Parker's. The lights dimmed and Parker heard her say something to the other voice in the room.

A new hand slipped into hers; this one was bigger and rougher. "Okay, Park. She dimmed the lights if you want to try opening your eyes again."

Parker squeezed the hand in hers and attempted to pry her eyelids open once more. Everything was blurry, but she was able to open them about halfway. Through the blur, she made out the shape of her dad's face; that's who the other voice belonged to.

Realizing who it was, she tightened her grip on his hand as much as she could muster. He smiled at her. "Glad to see you're awake. Your mom is on her way, but you know she was back in Washington for a business trip so she's boarding a flight in the next few hours; it was the best she could do. And Scott is on his way right now. I thought you might want to have him here."

Parker nodded ever so slightly, to give her dad some kind of indication that she was listening, but in reality, she hadn't absorbed anything he had said. It was taking all of her power just to stay awake. She let her eyes close and another rush of darkness pulled her back under into sleep.



Parker wasn't sure how much time had passed when she opened her eyes again, but the room was still dim and beeping like it had been when she'd fallen asleep. She looked around to the best of her ability without physically moving herself and saw that her dad was asleep in a chair near the end of her hospital bed.

She looked over to where he had been sitting when she fell asleep, and in that spot instead was Scott. He wasn't asleep like her dad was, but he was looking down so he hadn't seen her wake up. She did her best to move her arm towards him to try and get his attention without hurting herself, and she was able to tap the tips of her fingers against his slouched down shoulder.

Startled, he looked up and let out a sigh of relief. He took the hand that had hit his shoulder and held it between both of his own, planting a light kiss on the back of it.

"Hi there." He smiled, and Parker did her best to return the smile. It was weak, but it was there. "How're you feeling?"

Thirsty; she was feeling thirsty and she didn't know how to tell him, because she couldn't quite speak again yet. With her other hand, she gently brought it up to her neck and touched her throat, hoping he would understand what she needed.

"Water?"

Parker nodded, relief filling her with his understanding. Scott let go of her hand and walked over to the counter where the nurse had left a cup of water and a straw. Scott put the straw in the cup and held it up to Parker's lips to help her drink. She took a few

sips before she was overcome with exhaustion again and laid back down, her eyes almost immediately fluttering closed. She felt Scott's hand slip into hers and she fell asleep just as he gave her a reassuring squeeze.

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The next time Parker woke up, it was daytime. Sun came in the hospital room window. The chair at the end of her bed where she last saw her father was empty, as was the seat next to her. Though she was still in pain and there were still wires and tubes coming out of her, she was able to prop herself up on her elbows and move into a seated position. Everything hurt and screamed at her, but it was doable, which was more than she could say about it all the night before.

Next to her on the bed was a remote that controlled the television in the corner, the posturing of her bed, the lights in her room, and it also had a Call Nurse button. She pressed the button so she could let her nurse know that she was awake and so she could ask for more water.

About a minute later, a nurse popped her head into the room. "Hi there Parker. Good to see you're awake and sitting up. My name is Lucia. Is there anything I can get you?"

Parker nodded and attempted to speak; her voice came out extremely scratchy and hoarse. "Yeah, I was wondering if I could get some water."

"Of course! I'll be right back with that." She was gone before Parker could even say thank you.

Lucia brought Parker a plastic pitcher of water and another cup and straw. "Oh, your dad wanted me to tell you that he went to pick up your mom from the airport."

Parker nodded and managed to say thank you before she left the room this time. She sipped on her water and just looked around the room at nothing in particular. She debated calling the nurse back so she could use the bathroom--she wasn't confident she could get up and walk over there on her own--but decided against it because she didn't really have to go very badly and she didn't want to be annoying or bothersome.

After about ten minutes, her door opened and Scott was there.

"Hey," Parker said as he walked back in the room. "Where were you at?" His eyes were downcast and if Parker didn't know any better, she'd say he'd been crying.

When Scott answered, he was quiet. "I went to see Dylan."

Until that moment, Parker hadn't thought about Dylan because she assumed he was fine. It didn't even dawn on her that he was here, in the same weird smelling, sterile place she was. She immediately sat up more and began pestering Scott for answers.

"How is he?" Parker was pleading, and Scott couldn't answer her. "Where is he? I need to see him. I need to see him right now!"

"You can't see him right now!" Scott barked, though Parker didn't back down.

She didn't back down even though she was engulfed in what felt like flames; what was the worst pain she had ever been in. Even though she had tubes coming out of her arm and wires attached to her head, her chest, her thigh. Even though Scott had never raised his voice at her—at anyone, for that matter—before and she didn't like it when he did. She didn't back down because she didn't know what had happened to Dylan and no one would answer her.

"Why not?"

“Because he’s not awake, Parker.” Tears were forming in Scott’s eyes, “And at this point, they don’t know if or when he might wake up, if he ever does.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Parker was barely audible, all the air in her lungs having left when the words came out of Scott’s mouth.

Scott sat on the edge of her bed, careful not to touch her. “I don’t get it; I don’t get all the medical babble they give when they’re trying to explain. He’s in a coma, and they can’t wake him, and they don’t know if he’s going to wake up. They say in his own time, but they don’t seem hopeful.”

Parker couldn’t respond; she could barely even form a coherent thought. Dylan was in a coma and they didn’t think he would wake up. The only thing going through her head, over and over again, was, *This is all my fault.*

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A few days passed and it all blurred together, as time tends to when one is in the hospital. Slowly, Parker started feeling better; bruises slowly faded and stopped hurting, the healing was uneven and precarious, but it was happening.

After about a week, despite still hurting and moving being a big struggle, Parker was allowed to go see Dylan. She was still struggling to walk without assistance, so her nurse insisted that she be in a wheelchair and that Scott would take her to go see him. As much as she wanted to argue because she wanted to be able to go see her best friend without feeling like she was incapable of doing anything by herself, she just let it all play out. She knew arguing would just take longer, and she’d already waited long enough to see him.

Dylan's room was dim; the lights were low and the evening sky was visible through the partially open blinds, though it didn't do much to actually illuminate the room.

"Dylan's mom is here but she just stepped out," his nurse led Parker and Scott into the room. "Nothing's really changed except for the physical ailments that have been healing. His ribs are slowly getting better, and there's no more internal bleeding. But he hasn't shown anything that would indicate him waking up soon. I'm very sorry." And with that, she walked out of the room, softly closing the door as she went.

"I didn't expect anything different, but I still hate that she said it." Parker's voice was small, as if talking too loud would make things worse for Dylan.

Scott pushed Parker up to the edge of Dylan's bed. Just the site of him unconscious with wires and tubes and God knows what else sticking out of him made Parker sick to her stomach. The guilt just piled on more, seeing him in this state. She reached for his hand, not sure what she was expecting--maybe for it to be cold, or clammy, something--but it felt like normal Dylan. Not sweaty, not too rough, just there, always ready to reach for you when you needed him. Dylan was a solid foundation for his friends. There wasn't anything he wasn't willing to do for those he cared about and he made everyone around him feel stable, even when they felt like the world was falling away from their feet.

Scott was standing back from the bed, trying to give Parker some semblance of privacy without actually letting her out of his sight since her doctor had entrusted her to him while they were out of her room. Which meant he saw Dylan's mom first when she quietly entered the room. She didn't see Parker at first and greeted Scott like she

normally did when she found him in Dylan's hospital room. It wasn't until she turned around and saw the wheelchair situated by the bed.

“So, you've finally made your way up here.”

Parker turned out in her chair with a startled look on her face. “I'm really sorry I haven't been up here sooner, they wouldn't let me no matter how much I begged them.” Just seeing Mrs. Maas made the tears Parker was holding back fight even harder to break through and start falling.

Scott moved out from behind Mrs. Maas. “Angel, is there a problem?”

Mrs. Maas set down the coffee she had gone to get on the counter. Parker could tell by the look on her face that there was definitely something wrong, and her instinct told her that she was the problem.

“I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about you anymore, Parker.” Her words were quiet, but sharp. “I know the accident wasn't your fault. And Dylan adored you; we all did. But how is it fair that you're here and he's stuck in this bed. I should hate you. I want to hate you. But I can't. But looking at you is something I can't do right now either. Please, take your time with him. I know you've been dying to see him. But I can't be here if you are.” She walked out of the room without letting either of the kids respond.

“Angel--” Scott followed after her, letting the door close on a stunned Parker and a comatose Dylan. Parker made no attempt to move. She just sat there with Dylan's hand in hers, a million and two thoughts running through her head. The most prevalent one being: Mrs. Maas was right.

She had every right to loathe Parker for what she had done to her son. Parker hated herself for what happened, so why shouldn't she? Hearing that she didn't want to

hate Parker just made her angry. She'd rather Mrs. Maas hate her. Then at least there would be someone out there who would agree that this was Parker's fault.

It was as if a ripple had gone out and affected everyone; not just at the high school, but the entire town of Aurora. Everyone felt it, and no one seemed to know what to do. Even those who didn't know Dylan felt it; they felt the loss, the stagnation. Whether they realized it or not. It may be cheesy to say that it was something that changed in the air, because it wasn't quite that. But it wasn't quite not that either. The air didn't change, it was the same as it always was in Spring in Aurora. What changed was the feeling it brought.

The people that knew Dylan had their world nothing short of rocked. The solid bedrock of what they knew, no longer solid and instead, broken into pieces that couldn't be crossed without falling through. But it wasn't just the people that had known him.

Those that had known of Dylan but didn't *know* him, it hit them too. They weren't sure how to feel. It was like there was this overwhelmingly large and suffocating blanket of sadness around them—surrounding them, but not smothering them—and they felt the edges of it. They felt tidbits here and there of the sadness; they felt sad, but they didn't feel like they were sad *enough*. Like they were somehow disrespecting his memory by not feeling enough emotion towards this person they barely knew; or didn't *know* at all. Third-hand death is what they were feeling, and nobody knew how to cope with anything that was happening.

Even people who were completely clueless of what had happened and of who Dylan was felt off. They couldn't figure out what was wrong, and most of them just



attributed it to the weather or the traffic or the dog chewing up their favorite shoes, and did their best to push it out of their mind, tuning their focus into literally anything else they could.

While those close to Dylan didn't consider it a loss, since he wasn't technically gone, that's what it was. There was a loss of brilliance, of a light that only a young person can bring to the community around them. The world was currently missing a soul that made it all the better, and the loss was felt by all.

After a few days in the hospital, Parker was allowed to go home as long as she took it easy. In the end, she just had a concussion, a cracked rib, and a lot of bruises. By the time she went home, she felt almost no pain unless she moved wrong or pressed the wrong spot of her skin. She was allowed to return to school the following week.

In most of the following couple of weeks, Parker, Renae, Scott, and Lucas couldn't go ten minutes without someone stopping them to give their condolences or offer some kind of emotional or culinary support, or tell them some random memory they had of Dylan. Despite the positive and kind intentions, they all started to get annoyed. So many people felt the need to tell them they were sorry or how much they loved and missed Dylan, when in reality, few people outside of their circle really knew him.

At the end of the day, Dylan was the kind of person who was known for being kind and friendly to just about everyone; he never made anyone feel stupid or ashamed, and he almost always had a smile on his face.

Every day that passed was harder than the last for Parker. Sleeping didn't come easy, and when it did, she was plagued with nightmares of the accident happening over and over again. Sometimes in the nightmares, Dylan was there, blaming everything that

happened on Parker. She'd wake suddenly, scared and sweating, and wouldn't sleep for the rest of the night. After a while, she did all she could to not sleep.

All school did was remind her of Dylan and after a couple of weeks, she stopped going all together. No one tried to force her; they could see she was anything but alright. Her parents encouraged her to get out of bed or out of the house, but it didn't work. Someone always brought her the homework; either Renae, Lucas, or Scott. In fact, Scott was almost always at her house when he wasn't at school or at home sleeping. He'd head there immediately after school until it was time for him to go to bed and then he'd go home, and he would repeat that routine every day until the weekend, when he'd go immediately after waking up instead.

He was always trying to make sure she ate and slept, and occasionally he'd be able to get her to keep some food down or to take a ten minute nap, but it was never really more than that.

It was Saturday, and Scott had been over late the night before. When he got to her house, her dad let her in. Her mom was on the phone in the kitchen working so he waved hi to her as he made his way up the stairs to her room.

He knocked lightly, but heard no response so he opened the door as quietly as he could. Her eyes were half-open, fluttering as though she had fought with everything in her against sleep. She was still in the same position she had been in when Scott left the night before; her knees were pulled into her chest and her arms were rested on them, only now, her head rested on her arms and her whole posture wasn't as intense or guarded as it had been when she had been awake twelve hours ago. her clothes were crumpled and two days old and her flannel was only half on. Every hard surface in her room was stacked

with dishes that had barely picked at, or completely untouched, food on them. Her phone was dead and under a pile of stuff on the floor next to her bed.

Scott set his bag by the doorway and went to work. He hadn't intended to clean her room when he arrived there that morning, but seeing that Parker had finally fallen asleep—even if it was much to her dismay—he knew she needed to sleep and that her room needed to be cleaner if she was ever to leave it again.

He moved her under her comforter as gently as he could, so as not to wake her. Though, this was the first time she had actually slept in probably close to a week so it was highly unlikely that she would actually wake up. He then worked on taking all of the dishes down to the kitchen so that he could rinse them off and put them in the dishwasher. Due to the amount of plates and cups and bowls there were, that task took multiple trips and longer than he thought it would.

He picked up the clothes that were on the floor and at the end of the bed and put them away, to the best of his ability.

While somewhere in the back of his mind, there was a voice telling him he didn't have to do any of this, he knew that the desk was next. Throughout the whole process thus far, the voice had slowly gotten louder and louder until it was practically begging—demanding—that he stop and leave the desk alone.

Scott took a tentative step toward it and reminded himself that this part wasn't just for Parker; that it was for him as well.

In a fit of sadness, the first night Parker got home, she had flung all of the picture frames off of the back of the desk. There had been breaking and cracking and shattered

glass that had still yet to be cleaned up. She refused to even look at that corner of the room, let alone clean it up.

The pictures were them; pictures of Parker and Scott, Parker and Dylan, Parker and Dylan and Scott and Renae and Lucas. There were pictures that none of them were even in; pictures from Parker's childhood and life before she moved to Colorado. But Dylan had urged Parker to get the picture frames. He had driven with her to the store and helped her pick them out. It wasn't about what was in the frames, totally, but how they had come to be. What the frames themselves meant, for all of them, not just Parker.

Scott started by carefully grabbing the frames that weren't broken; the glass may have been, but the frames themselves were intact. Out of all of the cleaning Scott had done so far, this definitely took the longest. He spent hours picking the frames up and just looking at the pictures. He set all the least damaged ones in a pile, and all of the frames that were past saving, he did his best to take the photos out of them without damaging any of the pictures, and he set those in a pile of their own.

He knew that no matter how bad she was feeling now, and how long she would feel this way, that she would regret not keeping them. That somewhere down the road, after all of this was a faint and distant--albeit, painful--memory, that if she didn't have these pictures, she would wish that she had kept them.

It was early afternoon by the time he was finished cleaning and as he looked around the room to make sure he hadn't missed anything, Parker started moving and making noise. He walked over to the side of her bed and sat down on the edge. She had started to toss and turn a bit and was muttering to herself. He knew what that meant; she had told him about the nightmares.

He reached over and put his hand on her shoulder. He hoped to wake her up as gently as he possibly could but there's no telling whether or not that would happen.

"Parker, wake up," he said it softly but not too quietly. He gently shook her shoulder, just a little bit. Her eyes darted open and her breathing was fast and shallow. "Hey, hey. It's okay. It was just a dream. It's just me, you're okay."

She sat up and rubbed at her eyes. "How long was I asleep?"

"I don't know. You were asleep when I got here this morning and I definitely didn't want to wake you." Scott shook his head. "How're you feeling?"

"Like garbage, but less tired." For the first time since she woke up, she looked around her room. "Did you do all of this?" Compared to how it was and how it had been for weeks, it was practically spotless.

Scott nodded. "I hope that's okay."

"Yeah, it's more than okay. You didn't need to." She looked over at him, "But thank you, for everything. I know I haven't been very enjoyable to be around lately." She got quieter as tears started to form. "I just really miss him."

"I do too, Park. I do too."

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"It's good to finally meet you, Parker. Everyone has told me a lot about you. I'm glad you could join us today."

"Thanks." Parker sat in the fold out chair situated between Renae and Scott. Up until this point, she had been avoiding the group therapy sessions with everyone. But the time had come that she ran out of excuses. Her body was physically fully healed. She

couldn't play the "I have no ride" card because Scott was almost always at her house with his mom's car. No one was letting her play hooky anymore.

"Alright, now that everyone is here, let's get started shall we. For those of you that don't know--" Parker was the only one there that hadn't been coming, so that comment made her angry, "--my name is David Nichols, feel free to call me whatever you're most comfortable with."

"You weren't his only friend, you know." The words were barely audible but Parker heard them clear as day; they were intended for no one except her. She stopped just before the door and turned to look at the person who had spoken; turned to look at Renae.

"I know I wasn't," Parker wasn't sure what to say back. She felt the need to defend herself to her friend; maybe it was the PTSD as everyone was saying or just human nature acting, but she tried hard not to let it overpower her. "You all knew him so much longer than I did, so I'm sorry if I insinuated differently."

She was tired, and she didn't want to fight with Renae. She hadn't even wanted to come to the group therapy session. But pretty much everyone around her insisted; her parents, her doctor, her personal therapist, Scott, the school counsellor. Their insisting got more intense after they all found out what she had done to her room and that Scott had cleaned it up for her. She couldn't blame them, but that didn't mean she had any desire to actually go.

Renae had her back turned to Parker so her expression was a mystery, but her posture was not. Her shoulders were tense and her fists were balled up at her sides. Renae

was angry. At what, Parker could only assume herself. And she didn't blame her one bit. Parker was angry at herself too. She blamed herself for what happened to Dylan, so why wouldn't everyone else.

"I get that it was my fault what happened. You have every right to hate me now--"

"Nobody blames you but yourself!" Renae cut Parker off. She spun around as tears fell from her face onto the floor. "We've told you this since it happened; nobody is mad at you for what happened. I'm mad at you because he wasn't just *yours*. He belonged to no one, but the memories belong to all of us, not just you. You aren't the only one missing him; you aren't the only one struggling right now, Parker! Stop pretending like it's only you! Stop acting like you're alone in all of this. I can't take it anymore." Renae stormed past everyone out the door before Parker had the chance to react.

"Renae--" Lucas ran after her without so much as a look at Parker. She was just left standing there, looking stunned.

With Scott and Mr. Nichols watching her every move like she was about to go off any second, Parker had no idea what to do. She could barely fathom what had just happened; Renae's words continuously rang through her head.

*He wasn't just yours.*

*He wasn't just yours.*

*He wasn't just yours.*

Parker knew this; of course she knew this. She had known Dylan the least amount of time out of all of them. They had just happened to get close over the time she'd spent in Aurora. This whole time she'd spent physically recovering and blaming herself up,

down, and sideways despite everyone trying to convince her otherwise. Day in and day out, there was always someone there saying that she shouldn't blame herself. Everyone had said it to her at some point; Scott, her parents, the cops who had written up the report, Lucas, even Dylan's mom despite the fact that all she wanted to do was blame Parker. But hearing Renae say it to her, even if it was through angry tears, there was something different about it. Renae was never once to mince words. She didn't skirt around things to make someone feel better. She was truthful and straightforward, and whatever came out of her mouth was something she truly believed to be fact.

Without thinking about what she was doing, without saying one word out loud, Parker walked out of the meeting room and made her way towards the parking lot. She picked up pace as she made her way through the hallway. When she burst through the door to the outside, she was in a full-on sprint. She could see Lucas and Renae out in front of her, they were talking and like she had hoped, they hadn't left yet.

She stopped in front of their shocked faces, bent over and breathing hard. She wasn't sure what she had come out here to say. Despite what everyone said about it not being her fault, she couldn't believe that. Even with Renae saying it, she couldn't accept it. What she could accept is that was what Renae believed, and even if it wasn't true, it held some water.

Lucas looked concerned. "Parker, are you okay?"

Still struggling to catch her breath, Parker said, "Yeah, sorry. I hope I didn't startle you guys too much. I just wanted to catch you before you left."



“What do you want?” Renae sniffled. Her eyes were bloodshot and her nose was red. Tears still sat in the corners of her eyes and looked like they could start falling again at any second.

“Renae, Lucas, I’m sorry. To both of you. To everyone, in fact. I can’t say I’m not going to mess up again and make you guys feel like I don’t care. But that was never my intention. I know he didn’t just belong to me. I know I’m not the only one missing or the only one who is struggling right now, and I’m sorry I’ve been so bad at being a friend to you all and that I haven’t been there.” Tears were now starting to form in Parker’s eyes. “You’re all important to me, not just Dylan, and I’ve messed up, and I’m sorry.”

They were all crying at this point. Lucas put his arms around Parker in a hug and held her tight, and before long, Renae had joined the hug too. They all ended up sitting on the ground of the parking lot, hugging and sniveling, wet with each other's tears.

“Look,” Lucas wiped at his face, “no one expects you to be perfect, Parker. None of us even expect you to be *okay*. What happened was traumatic and horrible. But you’re not alone. You don’t have to grieve alone and you don’t have to remember him alone.”

Renae nodded. “You’re our friend, so don’t hide from. Don’t make us lose both of you.”

Parker couldn’t speak. She had no words to express the love she had for her friends at this moment. All that she could do was cry harder.

“What do you mean she’s not here?”

Parker’s dad shook his head. “She’s not here. She took my keys and left. And she’s not answering her phone. This isn’t something she’d normally do, and right now I’m worried about her.”

“I’ll go look for her, and I’ll let you know if I find her.” Scott had come over after school, just like he had every day, only to find that Parker wasn’t home. What worried him was the fact that this definitely wasn’t something she would ever do. She wouldn’t just not say where she was going and not answer the phone. She knew how much worry that would cause people.

Scott jogged back down the driveway to the car, climbed in, and sat there. He tried to think of all the places she might go but he could barely form a full thought. He was too worried about her. She’d been, reasonably so, off the deep end since he told her Dylan might not ever wake up.

With the thought of Dylan coming into his mind, he suddenly realized exactly where she might’ve gone. He turned on the car, and raced there as quickly--and as safely--as he possibly could.

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Scott found Parker just where he thought he would; down by the small outcropping that she and Dylan would always go to, together. He shouldn’t even know about it, but she took him there once in secret, just to be able to show him it. They spent

less than five minutes there before Parker made them leave. It was hers and Dylan's spot and they didn't share it with anyone, even Scott. As much as it could've and maybe even should've bothered him, it didn't. He never had any reason not to trust either of them.

She was sitting with her legs crossed on a rock with the blanket from her trunk wrapped around her shoulders. She didn't look up as Scott approached, but he figured she knew he was there. He took a seat beside her and she didn't say anything or give any indication that she knew he was there, but he still knew she was aware of his presence.

"Why'd you come here, Parker?" As the words left Scott's mouth, it dawned on him that they might not have been the best thing to ask, but it's not like he could take them back now. And despite having an idea as to her answer, he wanted to hear what she had to say about it herself.

"I haven't been here since the day of the accident." She didn't move at all, not even to look at him as she spoke.

"I know, so why did you come here?" He knew the story of the day the accident happened; he'd heard it multiple times.

She threw her hands up and let them fall hard onto the rock below her; Scott knew that couldn't have felt good, but he also knew that in this moment, she didn't care.

"I don't know why I'm here, Scott!" her voice was raised and tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. "I don't know why I'm here and he's not. I don't know why I can to live and he is asleep in that fucking hospital bed! How is that fair? I was the one driving; it should be me there, not him. He should be up and kicking and making everyone happy and laugh like he always does. He deserves to be here, not me." She quieted down as tears started to fall and sobs racked through her body.

Scott moved closer to her and held open his arms, which she slumped into as she could barely hold herself up anymore.

“This is going to sound really harsh at first, so hear me out, okay?” Scott looked at her and she nodded, wiping her face on her sleeve. “I get why you feel like this, but you need to stop. I’m serious; this isn’t good, nor is it true. Parker, neither of you deserved what happened and neither of you deserve what’s happening now. Dylan wouldn’t want you to sit here and blame yourself or say that it should be you or whatever stupid, untrue shit is going through your head.

“It’s going to take time, and everyone around you knows this, but you need to start coming to terms with the fact that it isn’t your fault. I will always be here for you and help you in whatever way I can, but you can’t keep treating yourself like this. It’s not okay and it’s not fair to you, or those who love you. You’re not the only one who lost him, Park. And I’m not saying you’re acting like you are, but we all lost him, and we are all feeling that loss and feeling the suffering of him not being here.

“It’s time to start working on not blaming yourself. It’ll take time, but it’s what you need and it’s what he’d want.” He took a breath and met her eyes, “You know I’m right.”

She nodded, but didn’t know what to say. So she didn’t say anything, and neither did he. They just sat there in an agreed silence as the waves slapped the sand lightly and everything was quiet.

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It wasn’t until about a year after the accident that Dylan’s mom finally held a funeral. Of course, he wasn’t dead, but with the way everything had been, and the likelihood that he

would probably never wake up, to an extent it just made sense. Everyone needed a little bit of closure; his mom and Parker most of all.

The amount of people that attended the funeral was more than Parker ever thought could or would. Of course, everyone from school was there. Many students, faculty, friends, and their families. As much as Parker hated that it had to happen, she was touched to see so many there for him. It just reminded her how loved he was and how much she missed him, which in turn really just made her cry more.

After about a month, Parker went back to school. She struggled all throughout the rest of high school, but she finished and she graduated, always reminding herself that Dylan would've wanted her to succeed, whether he was around to see it or not.

She did her best to continue living, even when it was hard and she didn't want to. When it was the last thing on her mind and all she wanted to do was lay in bed and never get up again. She had the support of her family and of Scott, and for a while after high school, of Renae and Lucas. But eventually they all drifted apart. Her and Scott stayed together, but she heard from the other two less and less and until it was nothing at all.

She ended up going back to Washington, and Scott followed. College came and went, they both graduated. They just did the whole life thing; got married, traveled, worked, eventually had Katie.

And there wasn't a day that went by that Parker didn't think of Dylan and miss him dearly. But eventually, it got easier, to the point where remembering him, most of the time, didn't hurt, but made her smile. Only sometimes did it still hurt to the point where she wanted to hide away from the world. But every day she got up, and did what had to

be done. What she wanted to do. And she knew that was the best thing she could do at that point.