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Return to Sender

Katherine Noelle Nypaver

The University of Akron, knn9@zips.uakron.edu

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Abstract

Return to Sender is a fictional short story that illustrates the potential consequences of neglecting to take others seriously. River Ellison, a high school senior at St. Jude's Academy struggling with depression and habitual self-harm, receives a note from his peer regarding his thoughts on suicide. His ordinary school day transforms into twenty-four hours of repercussions that force River to see his peer for what she is—an equal. Prefacing the short story, my critical essay explains why I find C.D. Payne, John Green, Jesse Andrews, and J.D. Salinger so inspiring to the young adult literature world. I also analyze how this literature was useful to me during my time as an undergraduate at the University of Akron. Following the essay, a self-analysis describes the writing process for *Return to Sender* as well as the concepts I employed while creating the story. My goal for this project is to develop my writing skills in the vast genre of young adult literature in order to broaden the understanding of mental illness in young adults and the treatments necessary to heal and educate individuals.

Critical Essay

Almost every fiction novelist seems to give the same advice to beginning writers: to become good at the craft, one must read avidly. It not only helps the writer form good structure, but it builds upon existing vocabulary and keeps the imagination working to help produce new ideas. I am of the belief that no idea can come from the void, it is always initiated or inspired by something else. Even if the inspiration is minor or unconscious, we cannot make matter out of nothing. So over the years, I've doubled up on reading material because like Stephen King said, I had to. And after taking a long look at the short story I have crafted, I've sifted through the branches of my piece and found the roots of it—the writing style, the narrative voice, and the subject matter.

C.D. Payne opened the gates of young adult literature for me. Before reading *Youth in Revolt* around the age of thirteen or fourteen, I had been trying to take on difficult literature because I was maturing and felt that my reading level needed to mature as well. Jane Austen's *Emma* and Charlotte Brönte's *Jane Eyre* were just a few of the novels I tried and failed to enjoy at that age. The complexities of the language, the time period situations, and the intricate relationships between characters made the works difficult for me to understand and appreciate, but still I tried my best to see their value. Upon picking up *Youth in Revolt*, however, I quickly decided that reading material did not need to be limited to certain age groups and what really mattered was the experience of reading the book and what was being taken away from it.

C.D. Payne, born in Akron, was the first major influence in my creative writing career. He crafted one of the most quirky and memorable male protagonists I have come across, who goes by the name of Nick Twisp. As a 15-year-old Frank Sinatra enthusiast and lover of foreign films, Nick is persuaded by his alter-ego, Francois Dillinger, to behave dangerously in order to

capture the attention of his crush, Sheeni Saunders. The novel is written as a private journal he keeps throughout his misadventures. The structure creates a direct connection between the reader and protagonist, placing the reader into the immediacy of the story. Because of this style, Nick is capable of drawing more empathy from the reader through his honest account of events. We also have the opportunity to believe that Nick might be a reliable narrator, as we are receiving information on the events through his own private entries that are supposedly for no one but himself. However, Nick's habitual exaggeration could sway a reader to believe he is as unreliable as any other cheeky and precocious high school student, which could dampen the reader's opinion of Nick and hinder the relationship between the two.

Youth in Revolt has had several effects on me, not only at the time of reading it but also several years later as I work on a manuscript of my own. Initially, it was refreshing to see that novels written in first person did not necessarily need to be formal narratives with professional vocabulary and sentence structure, but instead could be stream of consciousness or written as if they were spoken, which appears immediate and unedited. Nick's voice comes through in the journal entries as if he is actually speaking to the reader rather than logging his thoughts in written form. A good example of his carefree narrative comes from the beginning of the novel: "My last name, which I loathe, is Twisp. Even John Wayne on a horse would look effeminate pronouncing that name. As soon as I turn 21 I'm going to jettison it for something a bit more macho. Right now, I'm leaning toward Dillinger" (Payne 3).

The journal structure of the novel encouraged me to be creative and to understand that there are no limits with fiction. My eyes were opened to the idea that I could write in first person rather than third person, which can often limit the reader from hearing the protagonist's thoughts. I could view novels as a creative art project rather than a thick manuscript of black and white.

But what intrigued me more than the artistic structure was the humor in the novel. I thought, people like humor in everyday life so why would they not enjoy it in a novel? When a reader is enjoying herself, she would be less likely to put the novel down. Moreover, humorous characters have a better chance of being liked than serious and austere characters, and though it is a personal preference, I tend to enjoy crafting funny characters.

John Green's novels involve several funny characters, but I did not encounter them until my freshman year of college. I am guilty of judging books by their covers—the font, the coloring, the title name, the cover art, and the size of the author's name all matter to me—and Green's book appearances had always put me off. Of course, this greatly limits the texts I read, and occasionally I break my own rules like I did for Green. Not only is he the author of bestsellers like *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Paper Towns*, but he also hosts a YouTube show with his brother, Hank, titled “vlogbrothers”, where they discuss current national issues as well as popular culture topics. Green has spawned a community that goes by the name of the “Nerdfighters” who have raised more than a million dollars to fight poverty in developing countries (johngreenbooks.com). The author, along with a few other hosts, has started a YouTube educational channel called “Crash Course” in which each video teaches a short lesson in the sciences or humanities. Between his novels and his videos, it seems hard to believe he has any free time for his family.

Because Green is attempting to change the world not only by his actions but by his writing, he is going above and beyond the standard author when it comes to inspiring young adults. And though his videos are rather fast-paced and lighthearted, his novels tend to lean in the opposite direction. Green dares to write about the difficulties of life that most people tend to avoid, such as the death of a young person or painful unrequited love. Three of his books are

especially controversial and inspiring—*Looking for Alaska*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, and *Paper Towns*. In short, *Looking for Alaska* is a novel about a teenaged boy named Miles, who attends a residential high school and falls for a girl who lives a few doors down from him. She, however, has a large amount of inner turmoil that is visible through rash and irresponsible behavior. When she drinks herself into a fit of hysterics, she notifies Miles and his roommate that she needs to leave as soon as possible, and in turn flees the school in the middle of the night—and they help her do it. But we learn that she ends up wrecking her car and losing her life, and the mystery of whether or not she did it on purpose is never answered. This is heavy material for anyone, let alone a young adult, but Green does not underestimate the reader, nor does he dance around subject matter that should be addressed. The novel acknowledges questions about what mortality actually means, what survivors of loss truly experience, what the technicalities of suicide are, and what the effects of guilt are on a young adult. Green's trivial subject matter encourages me to incorporate difficult topics in my writing, allowing me to grow as a writer and an individual.

Some believe that death and loss should not be discussed until they are relevant, but it is better to be prepared and knowledgeable. Green is the master of discussing sensitive material through his young adult novels.

The Fault in Our Stars, which was made into a film in 2014, takes on some heavy subject matter of a different variety than what I've chosen in my own writing: terminal illness and death in a young relationship. When one of the characters passes away from a short but arduous fight against cancer, the other is left with grief, loss, and her own lung cancer to continue battling. Though it sounds bleak (and in truth, there is not much to smile about in the second half), the novel is completely invaluable because it confronts real issues that some young adults must face. Not only that, but the book is eye-opening to parents with sick children and stands as a useful

tool in understanding the adolescent grieving process. The protagonist, Hazel Grace, is very involved with her parents, as opposed to many young adult novels that depict parents and adults as either ignorant or abusive. This aspect makes the novel more marketable because it offers valuable information for every age group.

Lastly, *Paper Towns* addresses questions that may be relevant to a broader audience than the previous novels because it involves the understanding of peers and unrequited love rather than death and sickness. Quentin is an anxious and reserved high school senior who spends a wild night helping his neighbor and love interest, Margo Roth Spiegelman, exact revenge upon her friends for wronging her. The next day, she disappears and supposedly leaves clues for him to find her, and so he puts his graduation plans on hold to travel across state lines in order to search for her. He later discovers she never meant to be found. The novel fully addresses the mistake many individuals make when they assume they know and understand someone else. Quentin misunderstood Margo's need to disappear and reinvent herself and assumed she wanted to be rescued, and rescued by him. An appropriate quote from the novel indicating Quentin's assumptions about Margo states, "I knew how Margo Roth Spiegelman felt when she wasn't being Margo Roth Spiegelman: she felt empty" (199). This displays his overzealous thought that Margo needs him to revitalize her broken and boring life. Green uses Quentin to address the repercussions of what can happen when we hold individuals at a standard we see them at, when in reality we are missing who they truly are and how they want to be seen.

In terms of writing style, my sentences are structured similarly to Green's, relying on simplicity and shortened paragraphs. Green has a way of including all readers by keeping the vocabulary at an accessible level and crafting narratives that are personable and direct. From *The Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel narrates, "Maybe I was supposed to hate Caroline Mathers or

something because she'd been with Augustus, but I didn't. I couldn't see her very clearly amid all the tributes, but there didn't seem to be much to hate—she seemed to be mostly a professional sick person, like me” (100). With this writing style, the reader feels as if they are included in a conversation with the protagonist, and inclusion is huge to a young adult (and really anyone). Being only four years out of high school, I recall very clearly how much inclusion meant, and how much exclusion could hurt.

There is one novel, however, still standing as a classic young adult piece that was banned from high schools and libraries for years in the twentieth century, and has presented a protagonist that inspired mine completely. J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is the narrative of Holden Caulfield, a troubled and isolated teen who fails out of prep school and wanders the streets of New York, searching for answers to his existential questions. Along with Salinger's simple yet concise writing style, Holden Caulfield's character is inspiring beyond measure and has had much influence on River due to his strengths as well as his weaknesses—and how he handles both. Holden is an angst-filled juvenile who may seem sarcastic and rough around the edges but in reality just wants reassurance and complacency. Though this sounds like a cliché, it describes most young adults at some point in their life and conveys emotions every individual has felt. However, Holden Caulfield is special in the sense that he is probably suffering from undiagnosed depression. For instance, at the end of Chapter 14, Holden admits, “What I really felt like, though, was committing suicide. I felt like jumping out the window. I probably would've done it, too, if I'd been sure somebody'd cover me up as soon as I landed. I didn't want a bunch of stupid rubbernecks looking at me when I was all gory” (Salinger 136). In my own short story, River does not explicitly state the effects of his depression the way Holden does, but instead tends to react from their unconscious effects, which the reader sees through his poor decisions.

It cannot be ignored that suicide is the second leading cause of death in America for individuals between the ages of ten and thirty-four (CDC), and that depression is often unnoticed and untreated in young adults. Holden Caulfield is an excellent depiction of what untreated depression in young adults can look like (though it should be noted that mental illnesses can affect individuals differently). Without a doubt, Holden is a crucial protagonist in the YA literature world because he is a relatable and resilient character, struggling to find happiness and comfort in a world where he is labeled an outcast.

The novel is also valuable and inspiring because it was banned from high schools and libraries for its honesty. On several occasions, Holden swears (either in dialogue or his narrative), degrades women, and refers to premarital sex. These are just a few of the reasons why the novel was banned for several years and withheld from young adults, but it is of my opinion that these aspects only stand to characterize Holden and respect the reader by withholding nothing. It would be presumptuous to believe that young adults do not swear, have premarital sex, or degrade groups of people, so why should fictional characters refrain from doing so? Readers would be more likely to relate to a protagonist who behaves like them than to a character who behaves in a faultless and innocent manner. The blatant honesty of this novel is something to be admired, and I strive to write this way because I respect readers and believe they deserve honesty from the protagonist and from me.

I have discovered several things about the authors I've been inspired by, one being the fact that they are all male. This may be insignificant, but it also may alter the content matter of the stories I write. To find this out, I suppose I will need to read more books by women writers. Four out of the five novels I've described previously are also told by a male protagonist, and oddly enough, the novel I liked the least out of these five was *The Fault in Our Stars*, narrated by

a girl. Again, this gender issue may be completely insignificant but it also may be the reason I've chosen to make my protagonist a male. I have written from both genders but have found that the male perspective is much easier to write from because it is not as complicated to me. Writing from the male perspective has also helped me come to terms with the idea that gender is a social construct and has nothing to do with the morals and qualities of individuals.

Three out of the five of the novels I listed involve a death of a character, either one in the novel or simply mentioned in a way that affects the protagonist. I am intrigued by the idea that death can rock the perpetual momentum of life and ultimately create a new one out of the broken pieces. Though it is completely unpleasant to experience and can instigate serious suffering and pain, death is an inescapable part of life—to avoid it is futile. The stories that acknowledge the strength and resilience of the characters involved in the trauma of death are the ones that leave lasting impressions on me, particularly because death is one of the most controversial happenings in terms of personal beliefs. No one can say for sure what happens after death, so having a young adult character face this complexity creates a novel that demands contemplation and maturity from the reader. My protagonist, River, is stuck between stages of the grieving process after his mother committed suicide nearly five years before the story takes place. His narrative includes the loss and grief he still feels while also illuminating what it is like to live, day by day, in a state of suspension between death and healing.

But to contradict the darkness of death in young adult literature, all five of these novels involve streaks of humor. Whether it be the fact that the dialogue is comical, the supporting characters have humorous tendencies, or the actual narrative is just told in a funny way, each of the novels offers something to laugh about. And with the novels that include death, humor is especially important. Laughter has proven time and again to be an effective medicine, and with

something as serious as death, it is almost required. Jesse Andrews authors a comical young adult novel about a boy named Greg who is roped in (by his mother) to cheer up a classmate who is dying from the final stages of leukemia—what’s worse is that Greg does not seem particularly funny to her. The comedy from *Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl* rises from the protagonist’s painfully awkward sense of humor, which lightens the blow of cancer, if only slightly. It distracts the reader from the fact that a quiet teenaged girl is in the last stages of her life. Humor is a powerful tool for writers that allows them to convey dark subject matter without losing the reader, and allows for connections to be made not only with the characters but with the story.

Finding inspiration to write fiction is not always easy—the ideas don’t just leap off the page. Sometimes it takes careful reading, intensive thinking and brainstorming, and trial and error in the margins of notes. It is a never-ending process to understand where the ideas come from, why they appeal to me, and how I can apply them to my own writing. Every story can contain useful information about ourselves as well as the characters, and the more knowledge we acquire, the more we can truly figure out who we are and why we write what we do. I look forward to every story and every author, because every page has the opportunity to inspire a new idea.

Self-Analysis

Return to Sender was meant to be a stand-alone piece, but the characters I fashioned seemed to have more to say, and so in my spare time I've worked my way outwards from this short story, envisioning it to become a novel I one day would like to publish. However, the short story will be the subject of this self-analysis.

Kristin is a high school junior suffering from generalized anxiety disorder with panic attacks, and unfortunately she is losing the fight for control. As a way to find help, she gives River a note suggesting her thoughts of suicide. The idea of this cryptic note came from my high school government teacher. I don't remember the lecture he was giving, or the season, or what period I even had government (it might have been 4th) but he mentioned to us that when he was in high school, a girl gave him a note that asked, "What would you do if I told you I was thinking about suicide?" I don't recall his answer to her, but I remember how quiet our classroom got. We all seemed to hang on to the word 'suicide' even though it involved none of us. He did make a point of stating that nothing came of the note, but that wasn't enough for me to let that memory go. Years later, I still wondered what could happen if the wrong thing had been said in response.

As for developing characters, I knew I wanted my protagonist, River, to struggle with depression and self-harm. Mental disorders affect individuals differently and River's story can contribute greatly to the fight against stigmas surrounding depression and suicide. As I stated in my critical essay, the second leading cause of death for young adults is suicide (CDC), which confirms my theory that not enough is being done to help treat depression. So I wanted my protagonist to be someone readers can relate to, given their circumstances. As for his gender, I chose for him to be male because I believe that young men are often expected to hide emotions and swallow them without working through them. There is a specific social construct attached to

the straight male that in order to be masculine, he must not convey “vulnerable” emotions—I think that is completely unfair. Not only does it restrict how an individual should feel, but it limits his connections to others through miscommunicating emotions and can put unnecessary strain on relationships between parents, friends, and romantic partners. I wanted to write a character who struggles with this social expectation but who also defies it.

I also wanted to write my protagonist as a male because I’m a woman and frankly I’m tired of writing from a female young adult’s perspective. There are many expectations placed upon a writer when outlining the life of a young adult female—such as her attitude, her self-esteem, her emotions, and reactions (to name a few)—and I find these expectations constraining and distracting from the story. Therapeutically, writing from a different perspective allows me to get out of my own head and into someone else’s. In that sense, the time seems to fly.

The setting away from home simply eliminated the possibility of bringing parents into the story, which can often cause complication. Though *Looking for Alaska* was not an influence to this decision, it did further reinforce that I had picked the right setting for this story. In young adult novels, a teen-to-parent relationship is rarely written off and can be very important, but with such a short story there was really no room to include it. Furthermore, the setting of a boarding school is completely ubiquitous in young adult novels, particularly because it eliminates parental (and really most adult) supervision in a completely believable way. This allows for the characters to develop on their own, without being prodded or parented, and also escalates the plot and rising action much faster. As a school that mandates weekly counseling, St. Jude’s Academy was meant to educate unstable students who are capable of creating dangerous and risky situations that can escalate the rising action even more. Plus, this clues the reader in

that River might also fall under this category of unstable students and gives rise to suspicion of who he is as a character and what he is capable of.

And though River was enjoyable to write in this short story, his character proved to be a lot more complicated to pull off. Making a protagonist likable is crucial for the reader to enjoy the story, but it's much more difficult to accomplish when the character is depressed and suffering a migraine. By the way he responds to Kristin's note alone is enough to write him off as an inconsiderate and selfish jerk. So I more or less spent the second half of the story trying to redeem River instead. In *Looking for Alaska*, Miles tends to be very dislikable for the majority of the novel but maintains the reader's attention by how he recovers from his mistakes. And Holden Caulfield of *Catcher in the Rye* still seems to remain one of the most loved and hated protagonists in young adult literature, so I didn't make this project any easier for myself by basing my protagonist off him. However, this was an authorial decision I chose to make and by struggling with the challenge to keep River a likable character, I've grown as a writer from the experience.

Decision-making absolutely played a vital role in the short story—in fact, that's really all writing is. I needed to craft the principal of the school a certain way, put the characters in certain settings at certain times, have the dialogue convey enough without spilling everything too soon, decide what to tell the reader and what to leave ambiguous, etc. I, as an individual, am not a good decision-maker when I don't have a delete button. But in front of a screen, I can be as limitless as Microsoft Word allows me.

I did find the construction of dialogue to be the easiest aspect of this project. It just seemed to come naturally to me; the dialogue appeared more as something the characters were saying rather than something I was making them say. Dialogue is so important to a story because

it has the ability to bring the characters to life, to convey so many emotions, and to push the story forward without needing any actions. At the same time, it can be difficult because when done wrong, it will hinder the plot and the characters in a huge way. That being said, I did often find myself writing the dialogue, speaking it out loud, and editing it to make sure it fit well and came across as natural rather than forced.

After hours of editing this project, I discovered that I can never be quite satisfied and could continue to fix and edit words or phrases as I see fit. Perhaps that says more about me than the short story. But after constructing *Return to Sender* and “finishing” it, I have come to learn more about myself than I intended. The story addresses the concept of judgment, whether it be River’s mistake of misjudging Kristin, or Professor Hale’s ill-judgment of River, a lot of assumptions are made of people that are completely skewed. We are taught not to judge people, and of course it’s hard not to, but the story examines in depth the consequences of such assumptions and judgments. River in particular develops more compassion towards Kristin and towards his peers in general, but also begins to step away from himself as an individual and sheds some of his young adult self-centeredness.

However, one critical aspect of this story that I could not and did not take lightly was the idea of suicidal thoughts and the possibility of them occurring. I had to ask myself many questions about the effects of suicide on the people involved in order to keep the story realistic and the characters emotionally charged. Part of the decision-making process included whether or not to have Kristin follow through with her plan, or bring the note to the principal’s attention instead. The former suggestion would have a completely different turn of events, with River facing the guilt of being the only person to whom she reached out. The entire school would be a different place and River’s character development would set off on a completely different course.

Kristin's character would clearly be ended along with all the possibilities she could have brought to the story. But if she lived and instead gave the note to the principal, River could face a different kind of guilt along with more reflection on himself as a person, which I believe is far more important. The story is not about grief or suicide, but instead it is about compassion towards others and understanding the effects of mental illness in young adults. While Kristin's suicide could help convey some of the latter, I believe her choice to survive gives the story more emphasis and directs the attention back to River, the protagonist. This idea directly contrasts the plot behind Jay Asher's *13 Reasons Why*, published in 2007, which is about a suicide that has already occurred and instead describes how the students who had been involved contributed to the protagonist's death.

And in order to accomplish Kristin's reactions in the principal's office, I had to recall a difficult time in my life when I struggled with anxiety and depression similar to the kind she lives with. It helps an author write about these mental illnesses if she has lived them as well.

Return to Sender has me asking myself, "How much of an effect do our actions have on other people?" The answer, of course, is a lot. As young adults, we can live under the false pretense that we are in charge of our own lives and affect no one else's; we can say what we want and do what we want without consequences. But in reality, even the smallest gesture can affect someone's life—just as River's response affects Kristin, her sadness and anxiety affects River. It is far more important to be aware of others' emotions and to be considerate of them before saying or doing anything. When we are asked for help, we can't just deny that help is needed. It's not a letter we can put back in the mailbox with our own scribbled handwriting on the front, stating, "return to sender".

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Return to Sender

I wake up at 7:03 AM with a massive headache in the front of my skull. Luckily the migraines have subsided since the car accident last winter, but every now and again when the weather shifts in a bad way, those migraines return to me like an omen.

Leaving my dormitory, I stalk across the hall and knock on Jeremy's door with the hope that he's awake, though it's not likely considering this is high school and no one is awake before 7:50. Everyone pushes it until last call, including me, normally.

After a few long seconds roll by, Jeremy opens the door with half-closed eyes and erratic bedhead. "D'you know what time it is, man?" he asks with a yawn.

"You'd be getting up in fifteen minutes anyway," I say with a hand against my forehead. "Can you help me out?"

"Oh." His demeanor changes and he relaxes a little. "Yeah, man. Headache's back?" He steps aside, holding the door open.

I nod, thankful that his blackout curtains block most of the morning light threatening my eyes. Jeremy stands on his desk chair to lift a ceiling panel, only to pull down a big gallon-bag full of pills and capsules. He finds two white round pills and drops them into my hand, then steps off the chair and lays back down in bed.

"Hope that helps." He pulls the covers up to his nose.

"Thanks. See you later." I dry swallow the pills and return to my dormitory to get ready for classes.

“I think that was Demerol,” Jeremy tells me with his mouth full of toast. “I figured you’d want something new since you’ve already had the Vicodin.” I nod slowly so as not to disturb my brain and vision any further. “Did the headache go away?”

“Oh it did,” I reply as I take a bite of toast, relaxing now that I know I’m not tripping off morphine.

“Good!” Jeremy gives a quirky grin and continues eating just as I realize that he might be facilitating a budding addiction to narcotics. *This is how it starts, isn’t it?* I think as Jeremy takes a long swig of orange juice, oblivious to my inner accusation. *You get an injury and you need pain meds, and suddenly you’re popping Demerol at 7 in the morning and tripping by 8.*

The bell rings and we get up to throw away our trash. *I don’t think I can do this. Someone is going to find out I’m high as hell.*

“Let me know if you have any hallucinations. You might have a seizure or something.” Jeremy’s nonchalance keeps me from worrying too much about my current situation—or maybe it’s just the Demerol. “But I think you should be fine.” He claps me on the back and it sends my vision into a slight blur. Various shades of purple radiate from the center and I have to blink a few times to get it to stop.

“Yeah, okay,” I hear myself say.

It takes every ounce of focus I have to get to class—I feel as if I’m walking underwater. And I’m about 88% certain my calculus teacher knows I’m high. Normally I answer questions in class, but today I just sit quietly, trying to understand colors. *How can we see the colors? Physics, yeah, but that chapter is near the end of the book and I sort of need to know right now.*

I get called upon suddenly, so I do my best to answer although I figure that simply saying, “I don’t have a lot of thoughts on this issue” will work well. The question might have demanded a numerical answer though, I’m not sure.

Ms. Hutcherson, in a quiet and slow manner, asks if I’m feeling okay. *No, I’m actually so high off these narcotics I can’t tell where my fingers stop.* “Oh I’m fine, thank you.”

In second period, the girl sitting beside me spills her water bottle all over our lab table, drenching our textbooks and my homework beside it. I just start laughing.

In third period, I spend five or ten minutes asleep against the bathroom stall. One of the jocks who “really needs to take a leak” ruins my nap and tells me the teachers’ bathrooms get less activity. I don’t really think that’s a great place to get caught sleeping though.

In fourth period, I begin nodding off again from the exhaustion the pills are creating. There’s no better feeling in the world than the one that comes from letting my eyes slowly close for one, maybe two seconds just to find some relief from the nagging enervation. My body feels good, but in a horribly relaxed way. Eight times this morning I’ve already vowed to never take Demerol again. I’m completely absent during A.P. English.

By fifth period, I am relieved to walk to study hall where I can put my head down on the table and rest for 55 minutes. And I do, until I feel three small taps on my forearm.

Slowly, I lift my head and open my eyes to the frizzy-haired girl who hardly speaks, Kristin. She’s staring at me, unblinking. There has always been something innately weird about her that I just can’t shake. When I first met her (and I loosely say the word “met” because we have never spoken), she seemed like she was falling off the edge of the world. Like, she sat with her books flat on the table and her arms around them, clutching them like they’d float away if she let go. She did loosen up eventually but she still clutches things—her pens, her glasses when

she cleans them, her blazer lapels, her knees. It was always weird to me, still is, although today she's gripping a folder with a kitten on it. It's against her chest, maybe keeping her insides in; that's how she's holding it.

But when she sees me awake, she leans forward across the table, clutching a note in her hand. It's practically destroyed by how she's gripping it. Behind the glasses, her eyes are molesting my face and I need her to stop, so I grab the note from her.

She sits back in her chair and watches as I open up the piece of notebook paper which is covered in hearts and arrows. Once again, she clutches the folder to her chest and waits with bated breath... weird.

It reads: *What would you do if someone told you they were thinking about killing themselves?*

I glance at her and have to lock my jaw shut to keep from laughing. Is this supposed to be a joke? A number of thoughts flip through my mind like the pictures on a reeling slot machine, but my mental capacity to contemplate each one is subpar right now. I'm still slowly coming off the Demerol.

Frustrated, I take my pen out and begin to write a quick, short answer. I'm not about to be made a fool of by some dim-witted girl with a kitten on her folder. Not everyone knows about my mom, but most of my peers are aware that I've tried to take my own life several times before, I mean it shows on my wrists—I can't hide that. And it seems like she's trying to start some joke that's in extremely bad humor. No wonder she has no friends.

In a quick script, I write my response, fold the paper back up, and whisk it across the table to her. She won't have the satisfaction of making my life a joke, that's for certain. How can

she act this way in a school where everyone is forced to see a counselor? Does she think she's being funny?

The rest of the period, I can't fall back asleep.

After eating lunch, I feel revived and sober again. Jeremy and I make plans to head out later on to buy a pack of Pall Malls and a bottle of Southern Comfort with our fake IDs, just as a way of celebrating the accomplishment of completing one full month of senior year.

"Then let's summon the spirits," he states just before filling his mouth with a piece of garlic bread.

"No. No Ouija board this time," I announce as I finish off my dry rigatoni. Among other hobbies, drunkenly summoning the spirits is one of his favorites.

"Dude come on, Halloween's in a month! We have to practice!"

"It doesn't take practice! It either works or it doesn't." The silent kid at our table, The Dark One (as we call him), is sitting here watching this dispute while the annoying kid we can't get rid of, Brody, chimes in.

"You guys have a Ouija board?! Does it work?"

Jeremy murmurs, "Does it sound like it works, dumbass?"

"No, it doesn't," I answer for Brody. "Unless you're playing with Jeremy, who gets bored and starts moving the planchette by himself."

Jeremy throws up his hands in surrender and argues, "I swear to Satan I wasn't moving it by myself."

“Who the hell swears to Satan?” I ask and lean forward, elbows on the table. As I stick the prongs of the plastic fork between my teeth, I spot a student office worker enter the dining hall with a pink slip in hand.

“I do,” Jeremy says with confidence. The office worker approaches our table and I see Jeremy grin with excitement, probably thinking he’s the one getting summoned to the principal’s office. Instead, she hands me the pink “invitation” slip with a time marked for seventh period and I simply stare at it, confused. “Well that was lame.”

I’m sitting in Professor Hale’s office with the “invitation” in my hand. Our principal likes to invite us into his office, but what he’s really doing is dishing out discipline or checking in on our counseling sessions. I know a few people who’ve been invited to his office so he can say things like *I’ve been asked to see you personally. How are you feeling?* or, *Your counselor mentioned you were struggling. What can I help you with?* It may sound like he truly cares but rest assured, this man is just running a funny-farm and knows it. He thinks we’re all animals about to bite, and since he can’t muzzle us, he can only walk around us with a zapper. Like a lion tamer, or a dog warden.

As I sit in the chair and wait, I can’t help but wonder if my counselor, David, had anything to do with this. Last time we spoke, two days ago, I had mentioned that captaining the swim team was more stressful than I imagined and that it might be a rough season, but I don’t believe that’s grounds to be concerned for me.

Professor Hale leans out of his office door. “River? How’s your day?” I get up, button my blazer, and head in.

“It’s great,” I lie. “And you?”

“It’s quite well,” he says with a tight smile. “Have a seat.”

Behind me, the door shuts with enough force that the generated breeze sweeps the papers from one side of the desk to the other.

I sit in front of the large polished desk and recall how much disdain I have for this office. Last time I was here, I was told why I was going to counseling twice a week instead of once like everyone else does. *We’re inclined to believe that you may need extra care and consideration this year.* It’s just code for ‘you’re crazy.’ I tend to feel that way right now, actually.

Hale drops into the chair behind the desk and straightens his tie, asking, “By chance, do you know why you’re here, Mr. Ellison?” He’s got that tight-lipped smile again, and paired with his hands folded neatly on top of his desk, I think I might be in some trouble.

Maybe I’m here because I dozed off in 4th period. “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

Hale gives a soft nod, raises his brows, and says, “Yes, that’s a common side effect of Prozac.” He’s doing it again. I can’t seem to be a normal student in this office. I have to be a student with depression.

Then he says, “Well I’d like you to take a look at this,” and pulls a piece of folded up notebook paper from the hidden pocket in his suit jacket. Then he lays it down on the desk toward me. The hearts drawn on the back of it look wrinkled and weary, as if they’ve gone through hell and back to stay on the page. A weight falls onto my shoulders and my confidence drops down from a 10 to a 2.

“I can see how that looks wrong,” I start, but he cuts me off.

“Go ahead and open it.” He’s still smiling, crossing one leg over the other and folding his hands across his stomach, stretching back to watch me open the note. It’s been clutched a lot, Kristin’s doing.

My words leap off the page to mock me, to literally drag me by the arm and throw me beneath a bus. And if that's what *my* words are doing, hers are doing much, much worse.

-What would you do if someone told you they were thinking about killing themselves?

-I'd tell them it's not that bad of an idea, actually.

After staring at the paper for what seems like an hour, I reach to pick up the note, then decide against it and return my hands to my lap. I notice the ink is smudged in spots and is the only evidence needed to prove that I might be a completely horrible person. "She didn't do anything, did she?"

"Well, luckily no, she didn't take your suggestion."

"Suggestion?" I sit forward and pick up the note. "I didn't know the context."

"Mr. Ellison, this is a school for unstable students. You know the context." I glance down, silent. "Now I want to address the fact that I cannot have you shepherding my students off the roof. We work hard to—*help* all of you and this negates our efforts." He's lost the smile now, but he still looks gentle and dainty, like he's plucking his words carefully from a bin of possibilities.

"I wasn't trying to negate anything," I insist, getting frustrated. "She was making a joke."

"A joke?" he asks, his brows coming down in concern. Bad move. "David never mentioned any paranoia but, River," and he raises his brows right back up, "that sounds like paranoia."

I stare at him from the other side of the desk with my jaw set and my breath held. *We're inclined to believe that you may need extra care and consideration this year.*

"It seemed like she wasn't serious." It astounds me how defeated I sound. Vulnerability isn't something I'm used to, but his condescension is having that effect on me nonetheless.

“Whether she was serious or not,” he begins in a this-is-a-lesson-you-need-to-learn way, “you can never joke about suicide. Not here.”

I can’t even say anything because I’m just shocked we’re even having this conversation. I know the ropes of suicide, for lack of a better word; I know it’s not a joking matter but it really seemed that she had been mocking me. Maybe the Demerol really did cause some paranoia, because if I read that note now, I don’t think I’d respond the same. *It’s a good idea? What was I thinking?*

“And this situation puts into question whether or not our counseling is getting through to you,” Hale continues, leaning forward now. There is a thick manila folder sitting on the desk covered with a few papers, but I can see the straight line and the curved top of an R, and realize it is my name—my file. “Do you truly believe that suicide is the best option?”

If a jet engine dropped from the sky and crashed into the building, into this very room, I would be ecstatic right now. If a sinkhole opened beneath the school and swallowed us whole, I’d be okay with that too. Anything, actually, would be better than this conversation.

“No, sir.”

“Then why would you say so?”

“Like I said, it seemed like a joke.” *This* is a joke. Jeremy can keep his drugs to himself at this point. I’m smarter than this, but right now I feel like an idiot.

The clock is ticking on the desk and Hale pushes out a heavy breath. “Well River, we cannot treat this lightly, either way you spin it.” I’ve already set the note down on the desk again, and it just sits there now, laughing at me. “I think an apology is in order.”

“I’m sensing some restrained anger.” Jeremy and I are in the locker rooms getting ready for practice after this ridiculously stupid day. “Is it the Kristin thing?”

“How’d you guess,” I mutter as I shove my books in the locker and pull my shirt off. Tomorrow morning I am supposed to report to Hale’s office at 7:30 to apologize to Kristin. He assured me that both of our counselors will know about this and extensively work to “fix those thoughts”. Oh and he wants me to write an editorial for the school paper on why suicide is not the right answer. It’s going to be great, because everyone knows I slit my wrists a few years ago and didn’t slip away like I planned. This article will be equivalent to a televised screening of a guy with a trachea hole telling kids not to smoke cigarettes. It’s like a teen mom advertising condoms for Trojan.

“You should let some of it out,” Jeremy says as he begins to mess with his tie, trying to take it off. “The anger, I mean.”

“I thought self-control was a virtue.”

While other teammates file in, laughing and talking boisterously, Jeremy and I are hovering like a dark cloud towards the corner lockers. He eyes them with a look of contempt and then continues in a low voice, “Maybe to some.”

Self-control was something I used to be good at when I took the Prozac because I didn’t care about anything enough to get upset over it. But I stopped taking it a few weeks ago because I almost had too *much* control, with too many inhibitions, all the time. It was hardly living. “I just need a good practice to work this out. I need to get out of my head.”

Jeremy asks, “Is that what your counselor told you to do?” I give him a look and continue dressing. “I’m just saying, you should take action with this.”

“If I take action, I’m going to end up losing my shit, Jeremy.”

At this statement, he gives a pause with interested eyes. “So lose it.”

“Really? Hale already thinks I’m a sociopath; I’m not about to give him another reason to think so.” I shut my locker and lean against it, pulling the towel over my head in frustration.

“No, man, I’m serious,” Jeremy says, a little quieter. He leans in closer because the guys are still changing around us and pulls the towel off my head. “You need to let this energy out before you go in to talk to Kaitlyn or Kristin or whatever her name is tomorrow. Otherwise you’re gonna blow it. Let’s just throw a few swings, it’ll be fine.” He gives a shrug and adds, “We can do it and move on.”

I stare at him with my head against the locker, waiting for any signs that he’s joking. But his eyes are unblinking, the corners of his mouth firm instead of tilted up the way they normally are. “This isn’t *Fight Club*.”

“And I’m not Brad Pitt! Look, it wouldn’t be like that,” he continues with a dismissive shake of his head. “It worked out great with my brother’s ex and me.”

My eyes widen. “You hit a girl?!”

“She consented!”

“It’s not sex!”

“It releases the same brain chemicals.” He gives a passive shrug. “Come on. What are friends for?”

“Beating the shit out of each other, apparently.” I step off the locker with my towel and bag, ready to end this conversation.

“We wouldn’t,” he says, trying to convince me with an easy smile.

“You better get dressed. We have two minutes to be at the pool.”

“I am, I am,” he insists. “Listen, I know you like pain.” He gives a nod towards the scars on my wrists and for a moment I actually want to hit him for bringing it up. “It’s going to make you feel better. Don’t you miss that?”

Several of the guys have left the locker room and the sudden quiet forces me to shut the conversation down now. I’d stopped cutting when I transferred back to St. Jude’s Academy, but the counselors told me to treat it like an addiction since that’s what it is. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t miss it, especially today.

“It’s different,” I finally say.

Jeremy shuts his locker and replies, “Think about it.”

I think about letting him hit me and the ball of anger inside my gut contracts. Because Hale crushed my spirits and my masculinity today, I have too much pride to let Jeremy take a few swings at me. But maybe taking a few swings at him would help replenish some of the confidence I lost today. Maybe getting hit in the process is just the price I’ll have to pay.

“Yeah, I’ll think about it.”

Unfortunately, I didn’t get the swim practice I needed. We swam eight laps and then Coach Brandt talked to us about the upcoming meet while we sat on the bleachers, freezing. “Rest up today,” he had said. “St. Basil’s got a decent team and they caused us some trouble last year. I want our speeds up and our times down.” So yeah, we did nothing and now I’ve got this pain in my jaw because apparently I’ve been clenching my teeth for an hour.

After we change back into our class uniforms complete with tie and blazer, Jeremy tells me once more to “think about it” and then heads out. I stay back in the pool hall to discuss the meet with Coach Brandt for a few minutes, then grab my bag and head to the hallway.

When I push through the doors, the zipper on my bag gets caught on the hinge and instantly I'm pulled back. Everything spills out of my backpack, including my physics book and pack of cigarettes with one left. "Dammit." Bending to pick up the pack of Pall Malls, I see a set of black dress shoes near my things. Following my gaze up the pant-legs to the suit jacket, I see that it's none other than Professor Hale.

"My, my," he laughs and shakes his head, "this just isn't your day." I pick everything up and stand to face him, deciding that something in the stars was aligned to completely dump on me today. He holds out his hand and I drop the pack into it while simultaneously clenching my teeth so I don't speak. "Not much left in here, I see." He looks back at me in a what-do-you-think-of-that sort of way and I just exhale through my nose. "Tobacco on school property—that's an automatic ten hours of detention for the week." His grin finds its way beneath my skin and instantly I feel even more heated from my stomach outward.

Somehow, my filter disappears. Must have left along with my patience. "I don't know if ten hours is enough time for me to quit smoking."

"Well," he sighs, "I could let your father know. Would that help?" There's a slight twitch at the corner of his lip—is that a grin forming? Is he enjoying this?

My teeth are set on edge now. I can't say anything because if I so much as release my jaw even slightly, I'm going to detonate.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning, 7:30." He begins to head into the pool hall, most likely to catch up with Coach Brandt, but before he does, he stops with the door open. "Oh, and I look forward to reading your article, River."

“Let’s go,” I say to Jeremy when he opens his dormitory door, a carrot stick wedged between his teeth. “Let’s do this.”

“You—wait, what?”

“Let’s throw a few hits,” I say. My fists have been clenched since Hale confiscated my last cigarette, which so far had been my only escape from this reality.

“Let me grab my shit!”

We’re standing in the deserted parking lot of the Geneva State Park beside Lake Erie, just a few miles from school. Over the bank, I can see the waves rolling in calmly, like a dark ripple of water as the clouds move in just the same. The last light can be seen at the horizon where a brilliant orange sphere sits upon the water like a ship, radiating warmth up until it reaches the harsh deep blue of the incoming storm clouds. Behind them is a lighter sky, but it is being overcome by the masses.

“We’ll do it turn-based,” Jeremy says as the wind picks up. Since the park closes at dusk, the place is empty save for the two of us in our school uniforms. We picked up a pack of smokes first. “I’ll throw a hit, then you. All open-handed.”

“We’re going to slap each other?” That seems pathetic but maybe I’m just too infuriated to be gentle enough.

He pauses, then says, “I prefer the term ‘open-handed.’” We’re standing across from each other about four-feet apart, but I’m sort of pacing already.

“Okay,” I say, thinking I just want to throw one hit and be done with it.

“We’re not allowed to say anything,” he continues. “I mean, you can swear and react to it and shit, but don’t apologize.”

“Okay.”

“You sure about this?” he asks me.

“Yeah. Let’s just do this. We only have an hour or something.”

His lips curl into a small grin as he takes his cell phone and sets it down on the trunk of my CTS. I drop the pack of cigarettes and my car keys onto the trunk as well, then take off my blazer and lay it down on top for good measure. Jeremy says, “Good idea,” and removes his as well.

We stand a foot away from each other and Jeremy asks, “Ready?”

I start to draw a breath but before I can respond, Jeremy’s hand strikes me across the face. I’m not ready for the burning sensation that erupts near the edges of my cheek and the dull ache that forms at the joint near my ear. The heat of anger escapes my chest and leaves my throat in the form of a shout, but now my hands feel strong enough, my arms feel even stronger, and I’m alive.

Instantly, I throw a hit back, feeling my palm hit him square against the cheek, against the bone. “Jesus!” he shouts as he recoils, his hair swinging with the motion. When he looks back at me, his eyes are full of fury I’ve never seen before, and for a moment, I feel something in the pit of my stomach that I haven’t felt in weeks. It’s little but it’s there and it’s telling me that this isn’t the Jeremy I’m used to.

I could be wrong but I think it’s fear.

Before I can act, Jeremy hits me again, this time much harder than the first and my eyes feel like they switch spots for a second as I stagger a couple paces back to gain my balance.

Doing this on pavement wasn’t a great idea.

But I can't stop because electricity is coursing through my veins and the gears have already been set in motion, so I recover and send another strike his way, putting in as much strength as he did me, but just as my arm makes its way back down after impact, he throws a fist to my jaw. So much for open-handed.

"Fuck!" I hear myself shout as I stagger back, losing balance. Inside my mouth I can taste iron as my jaw begins to throb. "What the fuck was that?!"

And then he skips my turn and throws another fist towards me, but luckily I duck out of the way this time. He's not planning on stopping, so I can't either.

I close my right hand into a fist and I send it into him, into his right shoulder because I still can't punch him in the face, not him. But he comes right back at me and punches me square in the left eye, betraying me. This wasn't releasing my anger but merely building it up further.

I grab him by the shirt and feel my fist connect with his temple, feel something in my knuckle pop as pain shoots straight to my elbow; he swears, staggers, recovers, and comes back at me with another hit, blocking one of my own. "Is that it then?!" he shouts, spit and blood flying from his mouth.

So I slug him in the stomach, which forces him to double over long enough for me to say, "I thought there were rules!" I'm panting and trying to step away but he lifts his head, lets his eyes meet mine with a mockery I've never seen before. Then he swings again and we're back into it, sending fists into faces and knees into stomachs, swearing and shouting in the middle of the parking lot.

Finally, he throws a hit to my goddamn left eye again, which removes my balance almost completely and forces me to the ground. I hit the pavement hard, feeling the tiny grains of asphalt sting my face and hands as I pant. When I try to get up, my body feels weak and I relax

back onto the earth instead. I watch from the asphalt as Jeremy trudges to the car and for a split second, I think he's going to take the keys and leave.

Instead, he reaches a quivering hand toward the pack of smokes. He opens it up, sticks one in his mouth, then drops one on the pavement in front of my face.

When I roll onto my back, my muscles scream as I feel a warm liquid run from my right nostril down the side of my cheek. I swear I can smell iron amidst the fresh air and lake breeze. The same liquid is running from the edge of my lip down my jaw and throat as I pick up the cigarette and stick it in my mouth. Jeremy slowly bends down and lights it for me, then sits beside me with his back against the rear tire.

The clouds gather above us in the sky like spectators, swirling around to get a good look at our beaten selves. "You broke the rules," I manage to say with a sore throat. Smoke escapes my nostrils, burning like hell from wherever the blood is coming from.

With a laugh, Jeremy replies, "I always do."

The pavement beneath my back is tempting me to get up, but I ache too much. The cigarette between my teeth is burning down to the filter as I inhale on it, then exhale the smoke without removing it from my lips—my hands feel too heavy to pick up.

"Anything broken?" Jeremy asks from my right. He takes a drag from his smoke and relaxes.

"Maybe a knuckle." My left field of vision is growing smaller as my eye begins to swell.

"Me too," he says with a laugh. "I didn't expect to bleed."

"I didn't expect you to cheat." Though my body aches like it just went through the spin cycle four times, I'm not mad. But I do believe him now, when he said he got kicked out of public school for fighting.

He ignores my comment completely. “You feel better? You should be ready to talk to Kaitlyn now.”

“Kristin,” I say, and exhale heavily. “It’s Kristin.”

Stepping into Hale’s office feels more like walking into a room full of nuns while being dressed like the devil. My lip is cut and my left eye is swollen shut from the fight yesterday, so, yeah I deserve this reaction. Kristin, who is sitting in a chair in front of Hale’s desk, is now clutching the arms of it like she’s getting ready for blast-off. I look past her shocked eyes when she sees me all bruised and notice that her nose is pink at the tip, like she’s been crying. Actually, her face and neck look blotchy like a lot of girls look when they have to give presentations in front of the class.

She avoids eye contact immediately, presumably because she’s just as embarrassed as I am. God I feel like a jerk. *What was I thinking?*

Hale looks like he’s seen a specter. “What happened to your face?”

“It might just be easier if we skip that part,” I mumble, scratching the back of my head. Hopefully they don’t see the bloodied knuckles too. I already know I’ll probably end up in psycho-therapy just based on what I look like right now but I need to get through this.

“We’ll talk later,” Hale replies, and gestures to the chair beside Kristin. “Have a seat.”

I close the door behind me and sit down, feeling my newly-replenished confidence drain from me yet again. *We’re inclined to believe that you may need extra care and consideration this year.* At this point I’m inclined to agree.

If I say anything even remotely imperious in this conversation, even if it’s directed towards Hale, it will be a complete offense to Kristin, who is now using her right index finger to

pick at a hangnail from her thumb. Her hand is gnarled in a weird shape for optimal hangnail destruction and the miniscule sound it makes each time she picks and fails resonates in my ears.

“So, we have some business to take care of,” Hale begins with a hint of excitement in his voice, it seems. He looks at me with his brows raised. “Do you have anything you want to say to Kristin?”

Apologizing to her will make him feel like he’s come out on top, but if I don’t, what would that mean to her? Then again, I don’t even know her, maybe this isn’t as serious as Hale is making it.

But as I turn to her, I see it is. I’ve never thoroughly looked at her until now. Her unruly curls have overcome the failed attempts of the flat iron, and it all looks like a loss of control. Her nail polish is chipped, presumably because of all the nervous picking and biting. Her skin is broken out a little on her cheeks and near her jawline, but it’s barely noticeable. And when she takes her thick-rimmed glasses off and wipes at her eyes, I realize what I actually did. There’s a tear running down her cheek that she quickly smears away with the heel of her hand and accompanies with a self-righteous snuffle as she looks directly at me.

She’s brave.

I clench my jaw, aware that anything I have to say won’t really matter. An apology isn’t what she wants because it won’t undo what I did.

My voice is quiet when I say, “Why did you ask me?” She presses her lips together and glances down at my hands, at my wrists which are concealed beneath the sleeves of my blazer. She’s seeing through the fabric straight through to the darkened scars that have defined me, the ones that are vertical and horizontal, the lighter ones and the darker ones. She’s seen them

before, when I've taken my blazer off in study hall and rolled up my sleeves to do some physics homework. I knew she'd notice them but I didn't think she'd care.

There is a quiver in her voice when she replies, "I thought you'd understand."

I do understand. I know how it feels to want to die, to disappear from the bedroom, the living room, the bathroom. It's funny how feeling absolutely nothing is worse than feeling pain.

But now, as I sit in the uncomfortable leather chair beside Kristin, I realize that I may understand depression, but I don't know her at all. I don't know her situation, I don't know what she's going through, and I don't know where she's been. I'm not even sure what grade she's in.

I don't think I've ever felt like a bigger waste of space than I do now.

"I do," I tell her, but my voice feels so small I don't know if she even caught it. "Some of it."

She puts her glasses back on, looks at Hale, and says, "I think I'm ready to go."

"Are you sure?" he asks her. He's seeing her differently than me. He feels bad for her, looks at her like she's a lost puppy in the rain. The way he looks at me makes it seem like he's afraid I'm going to snap. All of it has to be fake though, he's just the dog warden, the lion tamer.

Kristin just nods and stands up, then says, "Thank you" to the room and leaves.

Hale turns his head to me and opens his mouth, ready to speak, but before he can, I quickly rise and say, "Hang on." I rush out the door and catch up to Kristin, who is already out the door of the office. "Kristin!" She stops in the empty hallway with her back to me, sniffing more as I realize she just wants to leave. "I didn't know. I know how it feels to be there, but," and I pause, hating myself for admitting this. "I didn't know you were there."

She turns and looks at me with softened features. She's not the threat I had seen her as, not even slightly. "We don't talk," she says, giving me either an excuse or something more to be sorry for. "I get it."

But she glances down at the floor like this is her fault, like she's the one who's sorry, and suddenly I realize how *there* she actually is.

"I'm sorry."

She sucks in her bottom lip subtly, thinks for a moment, and finally just gives a silent nod. I don't know if I want her to say anything or not, and I think she feels the same. But when she just turns and begins to walk away, I know I should let her go. She skulks away, her shoulders hunched and her feet slightly pigeon-toed. Her feet make a sound each time they hit the floor, a subtle scuffing noise that seems louder to me than what is real. When she turns the corner, she doesn't look back, and I don't blame her.

I slowly make my return to Hale's office, knowing that just because she was done with me doesn't mean he is. When I enter the doorway, he is leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed and one leg bent over the other. He is simply watching me with some sort of knowing look I haven't seen on him before. It's neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction. It's not disappointment but it's hardly amusement either.

And for the first time, I don't really have anything to say to him. The condescending way in which he normally looks at me isn't there anymore, and I think it's because he can't look down on me right now. I'm already doing it to myself.

And I think he knows.