

Road to Nowhere - Chapter 1

Word Count: 1841

When the final bell chimes Friday afternoon to dismiss the students of Austin High School, I don't join the crowd heading toward the parking lot or the bus line or home. Instead, I fidget in my seat in the front office waiting area and try to keep my eyes off the oversized analog clock across the room. Each passing second is a steady reminder that I'm stuck at school when winter break should be starting. I stare at the map pulled up on my cellphone to help distract from the perpetual *tick-tick-tick* echoing in my ears.

According to my phone's GPS, it's an eleven hour drive from Austin to Albuquerque. Traffic won't be an issue if I leave the city early enough tomorrow morning, and there won't be any weather to fight; Texas hasn't dipped below fifty degrees all winter. Even adding in a couple pit stops, I can definitely make it to New Mexico before dark. My bags are already packed, so all I need to do is get out of here, get home, and get a good night's sleep.

Easy enough, in theory.

"Luella?"

My head shoots up, phone immediately forgotten as I slip it into the front pocket of my backpack. Principal Harper stands in the doorway of her office and summons me over with a tip of her head. She's wearing a nauseatingly colorful sweater in preparation for the upcoming holidays. The cheery face of the reindeer stitched across the chest makes for an odd contrast against the terse lines bracketing Principal Harper's mouth. This isn't the first encounter we've had with one another, but it is the first time her displeasure has been so overt.

As I step into the office, Principal Harper settles in her computer chair and adjusts a stack of papers. A recently-added Christmas tree and paper snowflakes taped up on the window do very little to lighten the mood. The rest of the scene I'm familiar with: bookshelves crammed with color-coded binders, a framed photograph on the wall of last year's graduating class, and two low-backed armchairs facing the desk—one already occupied.

I fit myself into the vacant chair and ignore the sullen occupant of the other. Same way *he's* ignoring *me*. Definitely not uncommon for my prickly little brother to pretend I don't exist, even when I'm likely to be his sole saving grace in whatever trouble he's gotten himself into this time. I hug my backpack tight to my chest; both it and my anxious knee bounce up and down.

"Sorry to call you out of class last minute like this, Luella. I wasn't able to get ahold of your dad," Principal Harper says. My knee comes to a slow stop, but I don't let any kind of reaction play out on my face. "I've left a message and sent him an email. Hopefully you can tell him to give me a call back? I'll need to schedule an in-person meeting with him, whenever he's available."

She passes over a sticky note I pretend to read. Her personal cellphone number is scrawled across the bottom.

"He's busy a lot, but I can let him know."

"This is strike number three for Alasdair, and there are no strike fours. Next will be an expulsion, so if you could please tell your dad it's important that we chat."

I nod readily even though I don't actually know what spurred today's meeting. When I was called into the front office, I was only told to sit tight. Was Alas in another fight? Did his potty mouth or lack of filter get him in trouble with a teacher? Maybe he skipped class entirely. The *why are we here* matters less than the *how can I get us out of here as painlessly as possible*.

My steady compliance must be sufficient enough for Principal Harper because she says, "Thank you, Luella," and swings her gaze to the armchair at my side. "I hope you're not thinking this is all going to be forgotten just because we're going on break, Alasdair. You and I will meet again right here your first day back. Got it?"

Alas doesn't acknowledge he's been asked a question. I don't know if that's because he's being obtuse on purpose or if he actually can't hear. Principal Harper has one of those low, monotone voices. She'd probably be willing to speak up if Alas just admitted he was hard of hearing, but that's way too simple a solution for him. Better to let everyone think he intentionally ignores them. Feet kicked out carelessly and arms crossed in front of his chest, he looks like a tenuously-contained attitude problem

in a five-foot-two package. The thick stripe of hair he bleached and dip dyed blue obscures his eyes, but his frown is on full display and loaded with annoyance.

Little twerp. Him breaking the rules wouldn't bother me if he didn't also get *caught* breaking the rules. Every time he's caught, he's difficult to deal with. Every time he's difficult to deal with, I get dragged in to play disciplinarian while Dad's MIA.

At least by now I've learned how to use an innocent smile to distract Principal Harper from Alas's razor-sharp edges. I say what she wants to hear, which is: "I'll talk to him about it. And I'll talk to our dad. Soon. Expect a whole new, transformed Alasdair come January."

She doesn't look believing, exactly, but satiated enough to take me at my word. I increase the wattage of my smile to wish her a good break, then stand and give a slight tug on Alas's shoulder so he'll follow after me.

As soon as we're out of Principal Harper's office, my smile drops dead. I hold open the front door for Alas, who storms past me and across the parking lot. Besides a few stray staff vehicles and my car parked near the back, the whole place is emptied out.

It's predictably warm outside. Too warm for the layered long sleeves and leggings that seemed like a good choice this morning. I shuck off my flannel and tie it at my waist on my way to catch up to Alas. Despite his all black hoodie and jeans, I think he's too skinny to ever get overheated like me.

I speak, clearly, into the ear that has the better hearing of the two. I want to make sure the irritation in my voice is audible. "The last day before break, really? You couldn't have held off another hour before getting into trouble?"

He looks over to inform me, "I don't want to talk about it," as if that weren't already obvious.

"Don't care. We are going to talk about it, but not until we're on the road tomorrow. Dad doesn't hear a word about any of this."

Alas shrugs noncommittally. "Afraid he'll cancel your precious road trip plans?"

"He wouldn't cancel my plans. He'd just make you stay home instead of letting you come with." To avoid the embarrassment of being called a lazy father, if nothing else. Dad's typical idea of parenting is to dodge any and all problems until they're bad enough to spill outside the family circle. Alas

collecting another writeup at school will definitely be one of those rare instances Dad feels the need to bring down the hammer.

“Not like I ever wanted to go anyway. What do I need a bunch of college campus tours for?”

“You never know.”

“I *do* know,” he replies with the bullheaded certainty of every fifteen-year-old who thinks they’ve got the whole world figured out. “I’m not going to college.”

I don’t waste my breath trying to argue with him.

The entire point of the winter break road trip is so Alas and I can tour colleges on the way to visit our aunt up north. Dad already checked off on the whole plan weeks ago. He’s not coming with us, so I think he was mostly happy about the prospect of us being out of his hair for most of winter break. Alas was indifferent to the idea, but so far he’s gone along with it. Despite the big talk, I know a road trip sounds a lot better than being trapped at home with nothing to do.

That’s been the ‘official’ plan, anyway. Stop by the University of New Mexico, University of Utah, and Boise State before a final destination of Portland, Oregon. After spending Christmas with Aunt Christi, we turn around and head back home.

What Alas doesn’t know is that the whole road trip is a guise. I need him with me, and not because I have any aspirations of changing his mind about college. The road trip, the twisting route plotted on a map, and the real reason for all of it is a secret I’ve kept too long to risk blowing my cover now. If Alas knew the truth, he’d probably oust me during his first mood swing. If Dad knew the truth, he’d outright forbid us from going. I refuse to let this whole fiasco with Principal Harper derail my plans either. As long as Alas and I can both keep our secrets under wraps, we’ll be able to hit the road no problem tomorrow morning.

I click the button to unlock the doors of my SUV and toss my backpack in the backseat. Alas and I climb in front and crank on the AC. I let the air wash over my face long enough to cool down. A minute later, when I still haven’t shifted the car out of park, Alas turns to glare at me.

Growing up, Alas was constantly sick. It took him a long time to grow out of it. It took him a long time to grow, in general. I appraise his bony elbows, folded in irritation, and the pronounced hollows of his cheeks. Maybe he's still working on the growing part.

Whatever the reason for the sickness, it plagued him consistently enough to have permanent side effects. Recurring ear infections led to tinnitus and partial hearing loss. I learned to articulate myself well and face him when I talk. He learned to lipread for situations with too much background noise—whenever he can be bothered to pay attention, that is.

Not wanting to test my luck, I dial down the blasting air and mute the radio to ask, “Are you okay?”

“Stellar,” is Alas's biting reply, accompanied with an eye roll.

“Good, cause I'm not letting this go. We're talking about it tomorrow.” He huffs, but doesn't look away. Somewhere beneath that rebellious exterior, there's a modicum of manners. “And I expect to hear the truth.”

I mean it as much for myself as for him. He'll get the truth of the road trip as soon as I get the truth about what landed him in the principal's office. I throw the car into drive and head out of the parking lot. In twelve hours, the real plan begins. For now, what Alas doesn't know won't hurt him.