

Bloody footprints trailed across the floor, past the red toolbox, the TV, the couch, and out onto the porch.

Micah beat his fists onto the front door of the MacDougal house. Zack, the twelve year old, answered and said nothing. With dish sized eyes he backed up, "Dad!"

Brian's tall frame dominated the doorway a minute later. "Micah?"

"I need your phone!"

"What the hell happened?" Brian asked, pulling his cell from his pocket. "You alright?"

Micah's trembling fingers fumbled dialing 9-11.

Once the phone rang he ran again, back across the damp grass to Reigh's house. The cicadas continued to sing overhead, as if encouraging him.

"9-11, Where's your emergency?" A low female voice answered, calm and distant.

"I killed him! I killed him!" he cried out. The warm ooze of blood still lingered on his hands.

"Sir, who did you kill? Please stay on the line and provide your location"

"My girlfriend...she needs help too!" Micah's thoughts raced back to Reigh, sprawled across the couch. "Please send an ambulance, she's hurt bad!"

"You killed your girlfriend?"

"I killed her dad! She's on the couch and won't wake up. She took something!"

"Okay sir, where is your location?"

"It's on Foundry Row, a big gray house. I don't know the address. Please!"

"It's five eighty-eight Foundry Row," Brian shouted from the porch.

Micah repeated the address into the phone.

"Who else is there with you?"

"Her next door neighbor. He let me use his phone."

"Alright, make sure he doesn't go in the house because it's a crime scene okay?"

"Okay."

"Can you tell me your name?"

"My name is Micah."

"Okay Michael, how do you know she took something? Is there a bottle?"

Before the dispatcher finished speaking, Micah picked up the pill bottle. He squinted to read the faded label, "Yeah, it's Valium."

"Do you know how much she took?"

"The bottle's empty."

"Okay, Michael. Help is on the way. Stay on the phone with me," the operator instructed, professionalism masking any hint of shock or judgment. "Can you check to see if she's breathing?"

Micah leaned down and hovered close to her nose, where the faintest whisper of a breath grazed his cheek. "She's breathing, but barely."

"Check her pulse for me, okay? Put two fingers right below her jawline, see if you can feel her heart beating?"

A phantom of a heartbeat pulsed beneath her cool, clammy skin. "She has a pulse, but it's weak."

"The ambulance should be there soon okay?" Urgent computer keys clicked in the background. "What did you kill her dad with?"

For a brief moment he'd forgotten what he did. "A hammer and a knife."

"Where are the weapons now?"

"The hammer's in the kitchen, I don't remember where I dropped the knife."

Sirens ripped through the quiet neighborhood, announcing trouble with their discordant wail. Flashing red and blue lights painted everything in wide, intermittent strokes. An ambulance skidded to a halt alongside three police cruisers, doors flew open and uniformed figures spilled out.

"Stay back!" one officer shouted at a cluster of onlookers whose phones glowed like fireflies in the chaos.

Micah, his red hair matted against his forehead, sat crumpled on the floor, still amidst the mayhem, arms wrapped protectively around Reigh. He leaned close, and counted each shallow breath that fluttered from her parted lips.

"Stay with me," he whispered, the words slipping out in a prayer-like plea. "Just hold on..."

His fingers trembled as he brushed a strand of hair from her face, trying to anchor himself in the reality that she remained with him in his sheltered world, where every action was scrutinized under the harsh light of dogma.

Paramedics burst through the door, their movements swift and determined.

"Is she breathing?" an EMT barked, dropping to his knees beside them with a medical bag.

"Yes, but...but it's shallow," Micah stammered.

"Can you tell us what happened?" a paramedic asked.

Micah told them what he knew, while watching another one shine a light into Reigh's eyes.

"You don't know how much she took?"

"No," he heard himself say.

"We're going to take care of her. You've done good." The EMT nodded, slipping an oxygen mask over Reigh's face.

As the flurry of paramedics swarmed around her, Micah's gaze followed every movement, every evaluation.

"Please," Micah pleaded again and again, directing his silent cry to the EMTs, to God, to the abyss. "Please let her be okay."

Paramedics knelt beside him, a whirlwind of efficiency. "We've got her," one assured him, yet the words sounded distant, filtered through the haze of shock. He knew he should move and let them work, but his body resisted, grounded to the spot by fear.

"What's that?" he asked when a woman injected something into Reigh's arm.

"Narcan," she said.

A hand fell on his shoulder, firm and insistent. "We need to get you out of the way, kid," an officer said, pulling him back.

Micah nodded, standing as he watched strangers take over, cocooning her in their care. A part of him wanted to fight, to insist on staying with her, but learned obedience to authority kept him passive.

Two paramedics lifted her onto the stretcher, sliding the straps to keep her stabilized. He stood back, impotent in the wake of their expertise, and followed them onto the porch and down the steps.

"Stay back, son," an officer said, placing a firm hand on Micah's shoulder, but his gaze locked onto her pale hand dangling over the side.

In a blind daze, he stepped forward and took her hand, savoring the warmth between their palms. A rush of memories flooded back— shared laughter in hidden corners, the intensity in her eyes when he was inside her, her shy smile. An artist's hand that sketched worlds where they could be free from all this madness, all of it clutched within his fragile grasp.

"Fight, okay?" he managed, infusing the syllables with every unsaid word, every suppressed emotion that now surged through him.

"Son, you need to let go now," a stern voice cut through Micah's daze.

He looked up, his green eyes brimming with tears. A uniformed officer towered over him. With effort, he unclasped his hand from Reigh's. Cold air rushed to fill the space where their warmth had mingled. An electric ache spread through him as the cop led him away from his soft place to fall in a world of hard lines and sharp corners.

The paramedics hoisted the stretcher off the ground. Its metal legs snapped into place with a series of mechanical clicks, too loud in the silent scream of the night. The red and blue lights cast long shadows that danced like wraiths around them. His eyes never left her until she disappeared into the back of the ambulance.

Micah cast a long glance at the red taillights receding in the distance, taking a piece of his heart with them. His eyes pleaded more earnestly than words ever could.

The wail of the siren dwindled to a ghost of itself, and the world shrank to the space between his chest and his throat. Their story wasn't supposed to end this way.

"Time to go," the officer insisted. His words pulled Micah back to reality.

He imagined her waking up, alone and scared, without him. Would she think he'd abandoned her?

"Come on, son," the officer urged, guiding Micah toward one of the waiting cruisers. He wondered if this was the same cruiser he'd ridden in this morning.

His cheeks flushed in the night air. He'd spent so much energy worrying about Reigh that he hadn't considered his own crime. How deep she'd burrowed into his world—a world that, until recently, had been so small. The final remnants of his freedom slipped through his fingers.

"Hold out your hands. I know you're being cooperative. This is just a formality." The cold steel handcuffs clicked into place. With a grip both steady and sympathetic, he led the boy whose world had just capsized. "Watch your head."

Micah ducked into the car, his messy hair brushing against the roof. The interior was stark, every surface hard and unwelcoming—the antithesis of comfort. How many others like him but also not like him had sat in this mobile cell?

"My parents?" He directed his question at the void between himself and two officers up front.

"They've been notified," the one in the driver's seat said.

Micah's hands rested in his lap, the steel cuffs glinting. Through the window, the world blurred—a dizzy blend of streetlights and shadows.

"Are you religious?" The officer asked.

"I was," Micah said, the words tasting bitter. "But now... I'm not sure what I am."

"Faith can be a tricky thing." The officer glanced back at him through the divider, their eyes meeting for a second. "It's easy when things are good. The real test is when things fall apart."

"Like now?" With no humor, Micah forced a laugh.

"Exactly like now."

He saw all the familiar landmarks he'd grown up around through different eyes. They turned up the same street his parents took to get to church. He knew he wouldn't see the church again for a long time. As the cruiser headed down Liberty Street he gave a small laugh at the irony... going down Liberty Street to a place that would take away his liberty.

What would Brother Ryan and Brother John and all the other folks at church think now?

Micah leaned his head against the cool window and thought about his parents. He'd been their obedient child. But he'd also been the boy who asked questions. Now, caught in this web of consequences, the freedom he wanted was a cruel mirage.

His cuffed hands were no longer his; they belonged to the system now—evidence, a liability, everything but free. Now labeled a suspect, he shed his sole existence as Micah Asher, a case number, a young man with his future held hostage. No longer the shy ginger kid who had never heard a rock song or watched a horror movie, or the virgin waiting until marriage, or the kid who said no to drugs and read the Bible every day. That kid died with Lee.

The Justice Center came into view. He noted how different it looked at night, with the floodlights and fluorescent glow emanating from tall windows.

It had only been hours since he'd left. If he'd listened to his parents and not done all the deeds they warned him about, he would be home tucked into bed right now, and Lee would still be alive. But Reigh might not.

"Processing's through here," the officer guiding him said.

"Okay." Micah nodded, hoping that in time, he'd emerge from this chrysalis of circumstance with wings sturdy enough to carry him back to her.

"Processing isn't too bad," the officer continued, perhaps sensing Micah's distress. "Just follow instructions and answer their questions."

He tried to picture Reigh's face, to remember the warmth of her hand in his, but the image was blurred and distant. He didn't want to remember her closed eyes, and everything else hidden by a mask.