

Final

"Dad, what were the stars made for, if we were never meant to reach them?" Faye asked her father's tombstone hopelessly, her gaze lingering on the lifeless soil where aged cobblestone met the April grass. "Is it not the same fate I was so lowly handed? Promised the entire earth in my palms, only for those who planted the anticipation in my mind to strip every opportunity away, leaving blood-drawn scrapes to my fingerprints? By God's name, I deserved the success that others before and around me had, yet all I receive in return is the weight of failure and pressure born of circumstances that were never even my fault!" Her fingers dug into the dirt, earth wedging itself beneath her unpolished fingernails, as tears streamed down her welted face, not from sadness, but from anger. She gathered what dignity she had left in her near empty soul, and placed the flowers on his grave in a hurry. She walked away without so much as a glance over her shoulder.

At the cemetery gates, Pastor Caspin met Faye to address the outburst he had overheard. "Screaming at someone wandering purgatory will do you no good, madam," he said, his voice cold and measured. "Have some respect and some manners. He was your father, after all. You're lucky he was faithful enough to be buried in this church. His lifestyle came inches short of hell." Faye glared hatefully into the Pastor's eyes. "Damn you and your church," she spat. "My father is in Heaven, or may the earth be ripped from beneath my feet and have my throat slashed this very moment if I'm lying." Faye stormed off, and the pastor watched her with a daunting apprehension, afraid she might turn out just like her father: angry and deluded.

On the way back to her home, Faye gathered her spirit as she maneuvered through the familiar creek that laid between her house and the graveyard. Local kids would swim in its cool waters, while teenagers kissed beneath the bridge trying to make their first times feel exponentially more special than the fleeting reality they were. As Faye entered her neighborhood, a familiar voice called out, "Already back from yelling at the ground so soon?" Her friend Solene approached, slipping effortlessly beside her. "When do you think the pastor's gonna kick you out for disturbing everyone's peace?" she teased, trying to break through Faye's bland expression with a touch of humor. "Whenever my dad comes back, that's when I'll let anyone tell me where I can and can't be." Faye said, her eyes fixed on

the sidewalk. "God, won't you ever be happy again? You wander everywhere just moping around instead of actually putting any meaningful effort into something that could benefit your life." Solene said, trying to break a hint of reality into Faye's head. With no more words left to say, Faye quickly slipped away from her side, moving swiftly to her front door and slipping inside in an instant, leaving Solene frustrated by her sheer stubbornness.

"Welcome home, dear," called a disembodied voice. "How was your time at the cemetery today? Did they have you kicked out yet for being such a loud nuisance?" Faye let out a frustrated sigh. "I'm sure you and everyone else who tells that joke feel like real comedians. Must be nice to have your life set in stone, not ripped away just as it was your turn to live it." Faye's mother met her at the door, finding her daughter with her head hung low, her face dulled and hidden behind a curtain of sorrow. "Goodness, darling," her mother said gently, "you have a few mishaps and suddenly you see the world through a perfectionist's lens." She reached for Faye's hand. "Just because your friends got accepted into a university in Maine before even graduating high school and you didn't doesn't mean you can't still make something decent of your life." But as her mother's hand neared, Faye jolted her's away. "Nothing angers me more than being misunderstood in the very core of who I am," Faye said, fury steadily building inside her. "I was promised a world where hard work pays off, not one where the moment I reached out for opportunity, it gave me the exact opposite of what I asked for, fully knowing I was capable from the start." Her voice cracked as her chest tightened. "Now I have to watch everyone around me thrive doing the very things I could've done so easily if the world hadn't fucked me over and thrown me into a room full of rotted minds and foul mouths." Tears welled up in her eyes, her tone trembling between rage and grief. "Every day I live with the truth that I'm not as successful as I should be, not because I wasn't capable, but because I was denied a chance I earned. They looked me straight in the eyes and rejected me, held me back from laying the academic foundation of my future. So I'll be damned if you stand there and tell me all I do is exaggerate a few minor inconveniences. You already set your life in place, now let me wallow about mine being taken away from me in peace." Faye dreadfully drifts off into her room quietly leaving her mother alone to process her words.

Faye slammed her bedroom door shut and stood in the silence. The only sound was her breath, ragged and shallow as if even her lungs were tired of carrying her grief. She crossed the room slowly, her feet heavy as though gravity had grown crueler in the last few minutes. With a click, she unlatched her

window and pushed it open. The air rushed in, cool and sharp smelling faintly of grass and rain. Without a thought, she climbed onto the windowsill and let her torso lean out over the edge, her elbows braced against the frame. The wind tangled through her hair, tossing it around like the sea thrashing against still coastal boulders. Her eyes shut, and the neighborhood below moved as if she weren't part of it. The sound of a distant bark of a dog, the faint glimmer of porch lights, laughter echoing from across the street. Life went on without her. The breeze kissed her skin, and for a moment, she let herself imagine what it would be like to float. Not fall, not crash, but float up into the stars she so often questions. The ones her father used to trace with her fingers in the sky. Her hands gripped the wooden frame tighter. Not because she wanted to jump, but because she wanted to feel something anchor her, even if it was just the splintering paint of a windowsill that had weathered better than she had. To her, the grasp of inanimate wood felt stronger than any form of intimate human contact in that moment. Behind her shadow, a dim red glow began to wash over her room. As Faye looked up, she faintly spotted a red dot in the night sky. "Mars, please tell me the answer to fixing this anguished life of mine," she challenged the stunning planet. Faye turned around, her gaze shifting back into the room, only to see that the red light cast her shadow in part, illuminating only her legs and feet. Her eyes manufactured a village of tears as she realized the planet's painfully truthful answer. Under the quiet flow of tears, Faye cracked a smile.

Faye left the window open, and the cold stayed with her. She slid down against the wall until her knees touched her chest, the wooden floor a bitter companion beneath her. The laughter from outside grated into static. The stars above mocked her eternally, still untouchable. Just like everything else she'd once been promised. A stack of papers lay in the corner of the room, letters, outdated assignments, proof of every time she tried to prove herself worthy of something greater. Somewhere near the bottom, buried under the weight of wasted effort, was the report card from two years ago. The one with the administrative error that had labeled her "ineligible for advanced coursework" due to a missing form no one had told her to submit. One box unchecked, and the future she'd built in her head had unraveled. She wasn't rejected from Maine, rather she was never even given the right to try. She had screamed, begged, fought for correction, but the system had already turned its back. "It's too late," they had said. That single phrase had stitched itself into her spine, and every day since, she walked a little more hunched beneath it. Now, at seventeen, she was tired. Tired of hearing about silver linings. Tired of watching people chase dreams she was never

allowed to start. A moth flew through the open window, grazing her shoulder. She didn't move. The red of Mars hovered stubbornly above the rooftops. "If I tried again I would just fail," she whispered. She imagined what it might be like to disappear. Not in the dramatic, selfish way people feared. But slowly, like the erosion of rock, or ink bleeding through a page. One day she would be gone, and the world wouldn't even notice she had faded. Upstairs, her mother knocked once, then stopped. Even grief seemed tired of repeating itself. Faye turned to face the open window again. The curtains danced lightly, brushing her skin like the final hands that would ever reach for her.

She didn't cry anymore. She didn't scream. She only breathed. And that, more than anything else, comforted her in her last moment.