

Micah paced his cramped bedroom, a nagging intuition he'd never encountered tightened its grip. The dim glow of his desk lamp cast eerie shadows on the walls.

Cicadas sang like green lunacy outside, loud enough to hear through the closed window. Jacob and Bethany's muffled conversation in the family room hummed down the hall. He hadn't interacted with anyone since Brother John left earlier. His parents never told him he could leave his room.

"Damn it," he said under his breath, running a hand through his red hair.

The images of Reigh leaving the police station tormented him. She smiled at him, but he saw straight through it. The cops just let her go with him.

He opened his window, thankful to live in a single floor house. With his fist about to bust out the screen, he paused. *The car keys.*

After closing the window, he flicked off the light and inched his bedroom door open. Mom and Dad's door was closed, and the white noise of a box fan hummed in their room. He walked down the hall and into the kitchen, where the light above the stove illuminated the two sets of keys on wooden hooks by the back door. As if he had nothing to hide, like running to the store to pick up milk, he took the keys to the red SUV and walked out the door.

*Please, don't let them hear me,* he pleaded, praying for the first time in months.

He left with as much careful speed as his nerves would allow.

*Fuck it. Fuck church. Fuck what everyone wants. Fuck brother John and his fucking Bible. Jesus would want me to help someone in danger, not sit alone in my room and think about what a bad kid I am. Does God really care about alcohol and weed and rock music and sex? Does an invisible man in the sky really keep score.*

"God, if you're really up there, protect her," he breathed, driving into the night, and leaving behind the suffocation of his childhood home for the last time.

His knuckles went white on the wheel, and his jaw clenched. *Seventeen years of this shit crammed down my throat and it still doesn't make sense.*

*Will they try to make me stand up in front of the church and repent like that girl who got pregnant a few years ago? Oh hey congregation, I'm sorry I left my parents house without permission to rescue someone who's probably getting beat up by her psycho dad. I know I'm bad and God will punish me. After church you'll all whisper about what a lost soul I am. Fuck you all, you fake fucking hypocrite assholes!*

*What if I'm too late? Or she needs more help than I can give?* Despite his fears, Micah pressed on, guided by the little voice inside that urged him to defy everything.

All the lights were on at MacDougal's. The hopeful part of him wondered if she went over there to hide.

At last, he pulled up to Reigh's gray, unkempt house. His heart sank at the dark windows and the eerie silence that permeated the place. Even the streetlights cast a menacing glow over the porch.

"Reigh?" he called out, testing the waters after getting out of the car. No response. Micah fought the urge to panic. He took a deep breath and walked into the shadows, preparing himself for whatever lay behind those dirty windows.

His body shook as he climbed the worn porch steps and approached the front window. Fear gnawed, an insatiable demon.

Reigh slept on the couch. Bathed in a cool glow from the TV, her dark hair at war with her pale skin in the blue light.

"Thank God," he whispered. Seeing her alleviated the tension coiled within him. No sooner had it faded, when his eyes fell on her treble clef tattoo. Her arm hovered inches from the carpet, and below it... a pill bottle.

"Oh my God, *Reigh!*" he cried out, banging on the window. "*Wake up!*"

One sweaty hand slipped on the rusted knob, while the other pounded on the door.

His green eyes darted around the porch, searching for any means to enter the house.

"Please, God," he prayed, shouting with more desperation than anyone ever had in church.

His fists pounded on the door again, hands aching from the intensity each blow. "Reigh! Reigh, wake up!" The sound echoed through the quiet street, but failed to reach her.

"Please!" he pleaded, voice breaking with a poison cocktail of emotions. His heart thrashed like a caged animal trying to escape.

*The bricks...* Old moss covered bricks lined the crumbled remnants of a sidewalk in the front yard. Micah tore one from its damp tomb, its rough edge pressed into his palm.

He took a deep breath before hurling it through the glass pane in the door. The sound stabbed the quiet that surrounded her house.

Adrenaline sprinted through him as he unlocked the now broken door and pushed it open, shards of glass crunching beneath his feet. The glow of the TV threw an icy blue veil over the room. He rushed to her limp form on the couch,

"Reigh, wake up!" he shouted, shaking her shoulders. Her head lolled to one side, and her eyes refused to open. "Please! You have to wake up!"

Sounds of death on TV played in the background. Micah's hands trembled as he tried to steady himself. He'd never felt so helpless, as if all his prayers and good intentions amounted to nothing in the face of cruel reality. His sheltered life had left him woefully unprepared for a crisis. Basic first aid wasn't covered in the Christian curriculum forced on him since age five.

Tears welled up in his eyes, and his mind reeled, searching for any solution, anything that could bring her back from the brink.

"Please, Reigh," he pleaded one last time, taking her limp hand, his voice breaking. "I can't lose you."

"What the fuck happened to my motherfuckin' door?" A deep voice snarled, launching Micah's heart into his throat.

Lee Altfader stumbled into the house, reeking of alcohol so strong Micah smelled it across the room. His eyes scorched with fury, and his teeth, crooked and stained like decaying autumn corn, gnashed together in anger.

"What the fuck are you doin' in my house? Did you bust out my door, shitface?" Lee slurred, staggering toward Micah, who stood protective over the unconscious girl on the couch.

"Please, sir," Micah begged, his voice shaking. "Reigh needs help. She's—"

"Help?" Lee scoffed, his lip curling in disgust. "Why should I help her? She's nothin' but a worthless little bitch."

Micah clenched both fists at his sides, his vision narrowing. "She's your daughter!"

"She's done nothin' but ruin lives since she was born," Lee sneered. His gaze swept over Reigh, bloodshot eyes full of contempt.

Micah's stomach turned. "Please, just let me call an ambulance. She needs help!"

"Let her die," Lee spat. His face, bloated and speckled with broken blood vessels, was far too calm. "I ain't too worried."

"Are you fucking serious?" Micah shouted.

Reality shattered. Seventeen years of sheltered existence, the stifling rules and restrictions imposed on him all led him here. "I won't let her die," he said, his tone now calm and even. "And I won't let you hurt her anymore."

"Is that right?" Lee mocked, taking another unsteady step forward. "Get out of my way," Lee growled.

"No," Micah said, straightening his spine and squaring up his shoulders. "Give me your phone, now."

"I don't take orders from little boys," Lee said, wobbling toward the kitchen. "Just because you crawled up in my daughter's cunt doesn't mean you're special."

Micah started after him, finally understanding where the expression *seeing red* came from. For a moment, he forgot about everything, even Reigh, oblivious on the couch. Red painted the room. He stood, paralyzed but lucid. The only red object he could see, the toolbox on the floor, grabbed his eyes and held them hostage. In the red haze, he bent down and picked up something heavy.

His feet moved with a methodical pace into the kitchen, where that miserable drunk stood at the sink, taking pills—that miserable fuck who had never done anything good except bring Reigh into the world.

He wouldn't fail her. He couldn't—because he loved her.

The cold metal head of the hammer gleamed, reflecting his own blank eyes back at him.

"Stupid girl..." Lee muttered. "Damn waste of space..."

"Shut up!" Micah hissed.

Lee jumped and turned around. His eyes widened, taking in the sight of the red-haired boy, hammer held high, ready to strike.

"Wha—"

The sickening crunch of metal on bone reverberated through the kitchen, over and over. Blood splattered the faded wallpaper. Lee's glass hit the floor and shattered. His limp body soon followed.

Micah scrambled to the sink, leaving smeared footprints through the red watercolor painting on the floor. Lee's body convulsed in the bloody, glass flecked soup at Micah's feet while acidic bile coated the sink. He threw the hammer across the room. It hit the wall with a hollow thud, and slid to the floor. The faucet still ran and Micah's red hair dripped now. Chunks of his vomit washed down the drain. In the center, the kind of knife a slasher would use to carve up cheerleaders sat, soaked and begging him to pick it up.

He gripped the handle not caring that his own puke coated it. Lee's boot kicked him in the back of the leg. A crimson slug of blood oozed from the man's gurgling mouth. Maybe it was an act of mercy, or pure brutality, but the knife that could carve up a cheerleader could also carve up a miserable drunk.

The wound in Lee's skull, a moist filmy cave of gore and brain matter stared up at Micah as he drove the blade deep into Lee's flesh, slicing through the stomach. One swift stab to the heart ended it all.

Micah stood over the body, clutching the knife. The gurgling and the convulsions had stopped. Running water was the only sound now. Lee Altfader, an angry drunk who abused his daughter, no longer existed. A broken pile of flesh and bone lay in his place.

*It was certainly our sickness that he carried, and our rage that he bore...*