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Issho Ni

by

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B.A. Birmingham-Southern College, 2012

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

Issho Ni is a novel that focuses on four multifarious teenagers growing up in the Deep South.

For Mom, Dad, Jason, and Justin. For all the manga lords in the world.

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CHAPTER ONE

We have our reasons for choosing AX over ACen or Megacon, and if you ask us individually you'll get fifty different responses. Mitchell, who's into mecha, anime about robots, will swear it's to see Tanaka Juno talk about her new series, *Planet A*, and Avery will swear it's because AX is the best place to sell the manga, Japanese comics, she draws, and Maes won't swear at all because Maes is agnostic or atheist or maybe, impossibly, both. But the real truth of the matter, the real reason it has to be AX and not ACEN or Megacon or even Dragoncon is because Go Igarashi*, creator of the legendary series *B-san* and *Ashita no Kodomo* and well-known recluse, is making his first public appearance in America, and while the four of us may have different tastes sometimes, when it comes to series we all agree that Go is a god on Earth.

But deciding you want to go to AX and actually *going* to AX are two very different things. Sure, yes, we want to go, but kids want ponies and hippies want world peace. The problem getting any of that stuff—ponies, AX, world peace—is money. Now, Maes and Avery are all right in that department because Maes's parents can't say no, apparently, not when Maes barely causes any trouble and maintains decent grades. And Avery, well, Avery comes from money so old it's mentioned in Genesis, so we know she'll have no trouble getting her parents to fork over the funds.

Mitchell and I, we don't have wealthy parents. Mitchell's dad owns a drug store up in Cullman, and my parents are living it up working-middle-class-like but not with enough money to overindulge their son's weird hobby, especially not after the fifteen-hundred dollars they had to scrape up to get me into this school after my incident. Somehow, the Browns fail to see the importance of what they perceive as standing in the hot California sun for hours just to buy

anime merchandise and shake hands with Steven J. Blum^{*}, the greatest American voice actor around.

But what they don't see is that this convention is more than purchasing and handshaking. They don't see that Birmingham is a rope around my neck, cutting off what little oxygen I have left. I can't take this city. The rolling hills look more foreign and menacing to me than anything I've ever seen in a Satoshi Kon^{*} production. The people, smiling and chatting and laughing, appear just on the verge of collapse in my eyes. I'm waiting for an end-of-the-world sequence. I'm waiting for Little Slugger^{*} to give the city a bloody baseball bat to the head. It's like I'm watching a fall nobody else can see, and the only thing that makes it better—the only thing that makes here bearable—is the world inside of one of Go's manga, Watanabe's^{*} space-westerns.

The answer is California, as close to Japan as I can get, so near I can smell the yakitori cooking across the sea.

But, as it stands, I'm stuck in the southern plains. Mitchell and I are out of luck.

Or are we? Yeah, the parents won't give us any cash, but that doesn't mean we can't go. We're young, goddammit. We're not afraid to get our hands dirty and maybe even a little bloody to have the things we want. I've got my gig at The Guitar Shop, working nine-odd hours a week asking white kids if they want nylon or synthetic string, and Mitchell's got his illegal iron-pouring job going at Sloss Furnace—illegal because Mitchell's seventeen and Sloss isn't supposed to hire anyone under nineteen, what with the face-melting fire and the coal and the cancer-causing chemicals creeping out of the furnace—and we figure we might be able to swing something.

“It's time for some very basic math. How much are tickets?” Maes asks me, holding a mile-long arm up to the blackboard in the Spanish classroom in the way back of Vulcan High

School in Birmingham, Alabama. The classroom is uncomfortably Spanish. The alphabet bordering the ceiling seems all right, but the sombreros hanging off the teacher's mahogany desk and the picture of Ricky Iglesias under the "Hispanic Heroes" banner near the door seem a bit much, bordering on offensive. Our usual place of meeting, the art room, is locked up so tight neither Arriety nor Thumbelina could squeeze through there, so we had to settle for Room B, which is only open because the Spanish Club is supposed to be meeting but has, mysteriously, disappeared, probably to throw down with the French Club around the corner.

Mitchell clicks his fat fingertips on the keyboard of his laptop and answers, without glancing up, before I can even move my lips. "Tickets'll run us sixty-eight dollars if we register now. Prices'll go up the closer we get."

Maes nods her head, very teacher-like, and writes this number on the blackboard in the front of the classroom while I input the data into a spreadsheet on Lady, my laptop.

"Mitcchan," Avery says to Mitchell, "the certainty of your answer makes Avery smile." Avery tries hard to stick to the third-person but sometimes, when she's comfortable, she speaks in first. Even with my limited social skills, I figure this is some kind of act. For what and for whose benefit, I'm not really sure.

"Cute," Avery says.

Mitcchan's fat fingers hover over the keyboard before he clicks a button, clicks his teeth, rolls up the sleeves of his Crimson Tide sweatshirt, and scratches at the dead skin scaling around the scab on his elbow. "Maes?"

"What's the price of a plane ticket?" Maes asks. She unbuttons her coat and tugs it off. The school's got the thermostat up so high we can smell the heat.

There's a *click click click* before Mitchell answers. "They're five hundred and two dollars

round way.”

“Holy hell in a handbasket,” I say. “I would have thought it was more.”

“We're going to California, not Cairo,” Mitchell says.

“Cairo was the only C-place you could think of, yeah, Mitchell?” I turn on my stool and stare him in the hazels. We're all gathered around Senorita Foster's desk, our backs to the rows of invisible students behind us.

“I thought you might enjoy a place with so many brown people.” There it is.

I flip him off, and Maes gives him her death glare. It's funny, because when she does it she's like Kim Sun Ah from the Korean drama Maes had us watch, *My Lovely Sam Soon**. Not to say they're Korean twins or anything, what with Maes having thicker, more powerful eyebrows and a body so thin she might as well be one of Lee So-Young's* characters, but there's something similar in the exaggerated way their eyebrows sprint to the center of the forehead, in the “o” of their plump lips.

Mitchell is exactly the type of red-faced, freckly bastard I hate the most, the kind of subtle redneck who'll spend forty-five minutes on his front porch talking to you about the weather but won't ever invite you in. He reminds me of a diabetic Opie, and as much I hate having him here, I'd hate losing him even more. Ours is a small world, and losing even one of our ranks makes it substantially smaller.

“We're on a mission,” Maes says. She takes to the board again and writes the cost of the plane ticket in clean, legible handwriting. Actually, it's more than legible. It's beautiful and straight, and when she moves her hands the numbers line up perfectly even at the bottom.

“What does the hotel cost?” Maes asks.

“We don't need a hotel, silly,” Avery says. “Avery's cousins Haley and Paige and Aunt

Peg and Uncle Liam live in California. We could all stay with them.”

Maes stares at Avery and I glance at Mitchell, and, for a moment, the two Ms and I come to the same realization: Avery's family is weird. Or at least, Avery is. Maes, as Asian as she is, immediately realizes the complications of inviting the black boy and the redneck boy to Avery's cousins' house. It's Avery, Southern as she is, who simply doesn't understand it.

I break the news to her real gentle-like. “Avery,” I say. “That might work out fine for you and Maes, but Mitchell and I are guys.”

Avery is sympathetic. “You have penises, yes.”

“Your cousins might not feel comfortable with two guys staying for the weekend,” Maes says, and she's very loving with it.

“No way on God's green earth is that going to happen,” Mitchell says, less gentle than Maes and me, but I can't tell if he's saying it won't happen because it shouldn't, or if it won't happen because God isn't kind enough to grant him a scenario of a room filled with girls who probably look like Avery.

“Oh,” Avery says. “I didn't know. They let my boyfriend stay there last summer.”

There's another pause where all we hear are the computer motors whirring and Mitchell's soft pants as his lungs try to compensate for his heft. Someone dated Avery. Someone, somewhere, must have held her hand, maybe kissed her, maybe more. Someone, somewhere, in the state of California, probably heavily intoxicated on an early Friday evening and wearing any number of rings and reclining in a chair as she watched the sun skip over the mountain— somewhere, in California, there was a parent trusting enough to allow a fifteen-year-old girl and her boyfriend to sleep in the same house.

“You had a boyfriend?” I ask.

“Oh, yes, a darling boy Avery met during summer camp when she was thirteen. Terribly attractive—slender shoulders, tall, a smile that shined like the Silver Imperium Crystal,” Avery says as she holds her hand—embellished with cubic zirconia even though her Aunt Shannon hates them and has, as Avery’s told us, explicitly said no diamonds or diamond substitutes before five—to the buzzing fluorescent light.

“But most, most importantly,” she says. “He had eyes like Avery’s Toshiro.” She squeals, claps her hands, and jumps up at the mention of “Avery’s Toshiro,” a teal-eyed captain from the manga, *Bleach* *.

Mitchell, Maes, and I all watch in unison as Avery’s breasts bounce with a force that nearly shames gravity. She does this on purpose, I know that she does. Everything from her speech to her movements has been carefully choreographed for our viewing pleasure.

“A complete bishounen,” Avery finishes. She’s got a thing for bishounen—pretty boys—guys with eyelashes as long as the list of anime she’s seen.

Maes turns to the board. “Right.”

“You dated him purely based on appearance, didn’t you?” I ask. I regret asking it, though, because Maes and Mitchell both kind of stare off into space with the realization that neither one of them could ever have Avery. The girl with the ovaries, the boy with the girth. Nothing bishounen about them.

“Is that wrong?” Avery asks. “He didn’t like anime. Avery tried to get him to watch *Bleach* and *Naruto* * with her and he acted *totemo* * bored. He didn’t even play video games. I whopped his ass at *Call of Duty*,” she says before she covers her mouth for saying *ass*. She’s trying to cut back.

“He obviously didn’t like me for my hobbies,” Avery says.

“I’m sure he found something to like about you,” I offer.

“My Cs,” Avery says. She holds a hand under each breast, like she’s about to grab them, then stops herself and giggles. She promenades around the empty desks. “Avery is fine with that. People should be honest. Avery liked him because his eyes reminded her of Toshiro. That’s honest enough.”

“Two-hundred seventy-three dollars and seventy-five cents,” Mitchell says. He’s back to work, hands on keyboard. “That’s the price of the hotel.” He speaks with a hard Southern accent, like he’s punching down on each word. When he says *of* it sounds like *uh*, when he says *a* it sounds like *uh*, when he says *want to* it sounds like *want uh*.

“Per day?” I ask.

“No, total. Two rooms, six days. Cheap hotels sell out on the first day,” Mitchell says. And with this, we’re back on track. Maes writes the number on the board. So far, we’ve narrowed down our plane ticket, room ticket, and AX ticket. I mention food fare and, after a little debate, we decide to relegate \$240 for food. That’s way more than we possibly need, but with Mitchell’s stomachs we have to be careful.

“Transportation,” Maes says, “shouldn’t be bad. We can take the bus or walk.”

That leaves us with only merchandise money. Aside from meeting Go Igarashi and Steven J. Blum and all the other mangaka—manga creators—and voice actors, the four of us want to visit the dealer’s room, that grand, heavenly place where the entire floor is busting with anime merchandise waiting to be bought. Posters, pillows, and paddles—for the adventurous—await. Doujinshi—fan-made comic books—and anime DVDs and box sets. We can buy replicas of Ichigo’s* sword or Naurto’s shuriken. We can buy models of our favorite characters—Spike* from *Cowboy Bebop**, Ana from *The Haunting**, and Edward and Alphonse Elric* from *Full*

*Metal Alchemist: Brotherhood**.

I turn to Maes and say, “Full. Metal. Alchemist.” She smiles her approval. Just because Maes is a fan of pre-millennium manga and anime doesn’t mean that she doesn’t indulge in more than a few modern series. The four of us, being American kids, got hooked on anime the way many American kids do—we watched Adult Swim on Cartoon Network. For Maes and me, that means a mutual love of *Full Metal Alchemist: Brotherhood*. For all of us, that means a cult-like commitment to *Cowboy Bebop*, the series about five rogues—an ex-cop named Jet, a woman-out-of-time named Faye, a girl genius named Edward, a genetically enhanced dog named Ein, and an ex-syndicate member named Spike. Spike is the show’s center. He’s the kind of cool the four of us could only ever dream of being.

“Let’s say a \$200 minimum on merchandise expenses. Chances are that’s not even close, but I think we can all agree that ‘merchandise’ is at everyone’s own expense,” Maes says. She uses air quotes.

There’s a singular nod, like the kind folks in a congregation give.

An amazing thing happens as Maes tallies up the expenses on the board and I input the data into my spreadsheet. Mitchell and I both begin to pale. With Mitchell, the paling is clear—color flees his skin like it’s being chased by the syndicate, his freckles a mob of terror, his rust colored hair dimming to death. With me, nobody can tell, dark as I am, but I can feel the tingling effects in my fingers.

Going to Anime Expo is going to cost each of us \$1, 020. That’s if we want to buy the all-day passes and if we want to purchase tickets for a plane that doesn’t look like it was built when *Astro Boy** first came out.

“Holy hell,” I say. “In a holy handbasket.”

“Shit,” Mitchell says. “Shit.”

We’re both barely taking on any hours at our jobs. And we have five months, which would seem like a lot of time if we didn’t have eight hours’ worth of school five days a week.

“Can you guys do it?” Maes asks. She walks around the desk to stand in front of us, the classroom stretched before her like a red carpet. She’s half a broomstick in width, but tall as any second to highest shelf, so all eyes are on her.

“If we can’t, then does it matter?” I ask.

“It’s all or nothing,” Maes says, firm as I’ve ever seen her. Avery nods behind her. “We all go or nobody goes.”

“Well, great,” Mitchell says. He sinks into the hard plastic backing of Senorita Foster’s chair. “Makes me feel a hell of a lot better.”

“We can do this,” I tell him. “Really, we got this. We’ll have to be frugal. Nami from *One Piece** frugal.”

“Animation from *Shin Chan** frugal,” Avery adds.

“We’ll have to learn to do without,” I say.

“Without what, food?” Mitchell asks. “There’s got to be another way. I don’t mind working for the trip, but I don’t want to work for something that isn’t achievable in the first place.”

“Honestly, it would almost be disgraceful if we lived off anything but ramen,” Maes says. “Maybe we can cut the food bill in half.”

“Mitcchan can sell his figures,” Avery says. She means the highly crafted, incredibly detailed Gundam*—humanoid robot—replicas he makes at Sloss Furnace during his free time. He might be a bigoted SOB, but he’s a damn good iron-pourer. “Because Mitcchan has to go.”

Mitchell stares at her, probably suspecting the worst, and is rewarded with this: “Avery has already begun sewing Mitcchan’s sailor suit.”

“All that fabric,” I say. I can feel my eyes go wide. One of the main events at any anime convention is cosplaying—a combination of the words ‘costume play’—where fans dress as their favorite characters. But it’s not simply dressing up, it’s embodying. You become Goku* or Orihime* or Spike or Sailor Moon*. You take on their mannerisms, their ideologies, their dreams and hopes. You can be a hero. You can have powers that heal the wounded and the sick. You can be a kind of cool, the kind of person people want to be. You’re not your mother’s son, high school kid from Alabama. Your hopes and your dreams matter, and you could save the whole goddamn world.

You’re allowed to be somebody other than dorky kid number 111. You can be anybody. You can do absolutely anything. And that’s amazing.

Maes, always the one to bring us back to reality, writes another number on the board: \$200. Avery, Mitchell, and I stare at the number like we’re waiting for it to rise and speak to us.

“Cosplay,” Maes says. “Two hundred to \$400 dollars at its cheapest.”

Mitchell slides into his seat, and I cover my face with my hand. \$1, 200.75. On the low-end.

*

I begin by flipping over the rug. It’s a known fact that change hides under places you’ve never even been—hence, under the rug. I then empty out every pants pocket I own, then every shirt pocket, then every school bag I’ve ever carried since the first grade. I find my retainer. I find the love letter Jasmine Thomas wrote to me in the third grade. I find Jesus stuffed in between my spelling bee trophy and my collection of the removable, torn-out pornographic-

hentai* sections that Right Stuf includes with its free anime catalogs. But what I don't find is money. At least, not enough of it.

By the time I'm done searching my room, panting so hard that I imagine this must be what bad sex feels like—searching for a hidden treasure and never finding it, being exhausted after five minutes of hard, back-cracking labor—I end up with only two dollars' worth of change. And this is when I realize it: I'm frugal.

I have spent every dime I've ever had in my skinny hands. I don't save anything. And how does that make me frugal? It doesn't. What makes me frugal is that I don't waste money. I spend what I earn. And that inability to ration—that inability to let even one five-dollar bill disappear into the folds of my dresser drawer—has caused me to come away with only two dollars in Lincolns.

I fall back into my desk chair and sigh like a man disappointed in himself. Like I didn't get the promotion. Like I have to tell the wife and the kids we can't go to Disney World because I screwed up. And in a way, I have. I'm sans wife and sans kids, but if I don't earn \$1,200.75 cents by July, then I've let everyone down. And I can't have that. I get to work.

I roll over to my bag, pull out Lady, my laptop, and set her up on my desk. After she loads, I pull up a blank spreadsheet. I take a moment to glance around the room for anything I've missed. My bed pillows are strewn around like I've been tussling with one of the Armstrong* kids from *Full Metal Alchemist: Brotherhood*. Near the door, my closet vomits jeans, shirts, and backpacks. I glance at the wall behind my bed, where an *Ashita no Kodomo* poster hangs. The only thing untouched is my music station, set up near the back of my room. Castro, my jet-black Gibson acoustic purchased, three years ago, when I was 14, with a full year's worth of savings, sits on his stand. I pause.

My guitar is worth at least a couple of hundred dollars, easy, but I'd sell my soul to the Devil with a capital D before I'd ever sell Castro. I worked for that guitar, and I mean I worked. I helped paint people's houses; I washed cars at the used car lot my Uncle Mori used to own. I mowed so many lawns in so many hours for so many days that the city of Birmingham wanted to fine me for operating a lawn care "business" without a license. If anime is what makes Alabama bearable, then music is what makes living in general tolerable. I move on. To the left of my guitar sits a hand-me-down keyboard and a small black bookcase that holds my tuner, my spare guitar strings, a metronome, my bd-2 pedal and fuzz box because I'm optimistic about one day affording an electric, a number of music books, stray chords, half-penned music and lyrics, and a collection of picks categorized by thickness and color. Beside the bookcase rests an amp so old it's eligible for Social Security and a smaller, newer amp that functions about half as well as the old one—again, optimism. I swivel round and take note. My poster of the crew from *Cowboy Bebop* hangs strong, and I can almost feel Spike, Faye, Jet, Ed, and Ein ushering me on, urging me to go the distance. I begin.

I title my spreadsheet "Link's Monthly Earnings," and it's pathetic. I don't receive an allowance. The only things my grandparents have ever sent me are love, kisses, and baked goods. All I've got is church gig money, work money, and odd-job money. A church gig pays about fifty bucks a show, but that varies, and the shows are far and few between, mostly for one or two church lock-ins or Saturday carnivals. Maybe one every other month. \$150 flat. One hundred and change if you count the string changes I do before each show. As for odd jobs, the church pays me to watch after the kids during Wednesday Bible Study every once in a while, but again, that's a \$50 gig, take it or leave it, and Mom doesn't feel right about me taking it at all. Says it'd be more Christian to do it for free. It'd also be more Christian to love all people, including the gays,

I want to say, but I don't.

That only leaves The Guitar Shop, which pays \$7.25 an hour and I only average about nine hours a week. I type out my expenses:

$\$7.25$ (per hour) \times 9 (hours per week) \times 4 (weeks/one month) = $\$261$
 $\$261$ - $\$40$ (gas) - $\$20$ (guitar) - $\$20$ (taxes/the man holding people down) = $\$181$

It'll be February in a matter of days and it's too late to ask Myrtle, my boss, for more hours this week, which means I can't really begin my saving until at least February first and we'll need to buy the plane tickets at least a month out, June third. That gives me about four months.

I pull up the spreadsheet—"Getting the Four of Us to Anime Expo"—Maes, Avery, Mitchell, and I made at meeting:

Plane ticket from Birmingham, AL, to Los Angeles, CA = $\$502$ (peak travel season)
Hotel (2 rooms, one for the guys, one for the girls): $\$273.75$ per person
Food: $\$120$ per person
Cosplay: $\$240$ - $\$400$ per person
Anime Convention Entry: $\$65$
Total: $\$1200.75$ - $\$1400.75$

I like numbers. Numbers are constant creatures. Numbers keep you accountable. They say 5, 860,000 people died in the Holocaust. They don't say 12,5000,000 Africans were traded as slaves.

I cover my face with my hands. I'm doing it again. I'm overthinking things. I take a deep breath and raise my head. I need to focus. I do the math and figure out that working 18 hours will get me $\$1528$ after miscellaneous expenses are taken out.

I can do this. I can work three hours six days a week, or, more realistically, I can work six hours on Saturday and four hours three times during the weekdays. Even if I don't do any Bible Study Babysitting or church gigs, I'll still make enough to go to AX if I increase my hours and

don't do anything extra.

And if I can make it, that means Mitchell can too. I cross my arms and fold them behind my head, and the realization that this isn't as impossible as it seemed an hour ago sets in. My eyes close, and I allow myself to dream—me, surrounded by tens of thousands of other costumed people at AX. Me and Maes, my singer, on stage performing Aya Hirano's* "God Knows." I want to be a guitarist. I want Maes to be my singer and I want us to make music even though it's a farfetched dream and not because we're young and incapable of thrilling a crowd, not because we're inexperienced, but because Maes has no drive to sing on a stage and I have no ability. What I mean is, while the idea of being big in Japan and big at AX wows me, really gets me going, I've got stage fright, bad. I can play at church, I can play with Maes. But the idea of playing in front of thousands of people both excites and stuns.

But I have this crazy hope that I'll journey to AX and all of my anxiousness will melt away. I'll meet Go Igarashi, famed manga creator of *B-san*, *Koko Ni Doko Ni Aru No*, *Ashita no Kodomo*, and *The Haunting* and I'll go right up to him and I'll say, "Sir, you've changed my life. Your stories give me hope. Your characters give me hope." I'll pull on my guitar, plug in my amp, and I'll play him the best song I can, a song written just for one of his series. He'll be moved. He'll put his hand over his heart and he will be moved. He'll tell me that he can hear it—the drive and the passion and the something special—and he'll hand me his card and he'll say, "You have to write the songs for my anime. It can only be you." And I can die after this. I can fucking die because Go Igarashi has deemed me worthy. Because my music will mean something to someone, give someone what Go has given me.

Maes, Avery, Mitchell, and I are all different. Maes is into pre-millennium anime and manga, loves her shoujo*—girls comics—from the 50s and 60s. She likes history, she says, even

when they get it wrong, which according to her is all the time. Avery's into anything yaoi—gay men porn—and team shounens*, any show where five or more members are duking it out to save the world (her *Dragon Ball Z** knowledge rivals my own, and when I ask her to order all the villains, she does it by episode number and title). I don't know if it's the iron pouring—the ash, the smoke, the red industrial pipes of Sloss Furnace—or whether it's something else, but Mitchell's into mecha, anime about robots and flying ships and metal. He's *Gundam* and *Evangelion** and *Melody of Oblivion*. But he's also space-westerns. *Trigun** and *Cowboy Bebop*.

For me, it's music. I fall in love with soundtracks. If Maes searches for meaning through history, then I find meaning in sound. *Cowboy Bebop's* jazz, funk, rock. *Beck's** indie and metal. *Ghost in the Shell's** operatic and balladic tracks. Anything with composer Yoko Kanno* in the credits and I'm there, first one there, been there for hours, was born there.

Go's work is different. He writes about life just after WWII in Japan. He writes about Japanese politics. He writes about Ami Tanaka, the 16-year-old Japanese girl who one day wakes to painful headaches. Who discovers that her mind is evolving. Who discovers that thinking of doing something becomes the *same* as doing it. Whose friends go through hell—and blood—trying to protect her.

Go was born in Hiroshima, Japan, six years before we dropped the bomb. He's a hibakusha, an atomic bomb survivor, literally an “explosion-affected person.” He's seen the world at its ugliest and cruelest, has the nightmares to mark the occasion. Hibakusha aren't well received in Japan. In a land where kamikaze blasted through the sky, dying in the name of the emperor, survivors of a tragedy are seen as shameful, diseased people. What gave them the right to survive, to be alive? Maybe I'm crazy, but I can relate to that outcast feeling in a world where people don't seem to care about you. Where they're practically waiting for you to fail for reasons

you can't control.

Go is different. He wrote *B-san*, a collection of manga stories about the war, in six months after 17 years of remembering. That seems amazing. From bombings to books and no trace of bitterness. He speaks on behalf of the hibakusha. He rallies for their causes and for their pain. He writes such amazing stories and that's something I can hold onto. Something real and wonderful.

The door to my room creaks open, and my little brother, Byron, bops in. He's got sleep in his eyes and what might be drool on his shirt. He's obviously just been doing his homework.

"Knock knock."

"Who's there?" he asks.

"No, I mean you're supposed to knock knock before you enter my room." I lunge forward and pin him in a headlock, which isn't really fair since he's small for his age. He flails in my arms.

"Lincoln, let me go. Let me go!" he shouts. He tries to pry my hands off, but I hold on tighter.

"What do you want?" When I peek down at him all I can see is the top of his Mohawk.

"Dinner. Dinner's ready."

I let him go. "What are we having?"

"Spaghetti."

"Nice," I say. I put him in another headlock and tug him out the door. By the time we make it to the bottom of the stairs, Mom's got everything plated. Dad's already loading up on the cheeses.

"Are we eating at the table?" The plates are set out all nice and orderly at the small

kitchen table. Dad's seated in the chair that has a view of the great room. He can see the television from his seat.

"Yes." Mom goes into the great room and shuts off the television.

She walks back into the kitchen and opens one of the dark, wood cabinet doors before Dad can say anything about it. Like he would.

"She read it in an *Essence* magazine," Dad says as I take a seat, scraping the chair against the cracked white linoleum. "Eating together is good for the family." He rubs at the side of his eye, tired.

"*Criminal Minds* is recording, right?" I peek past Dad's head, past the outline of the white refrigerator and the pantry and the broom and dustpan and right into the black vacuum of the television set.

He nods and takes a bite of spaghetti. I sit down and pick up my fork. Byron watches me and does the same, jamming his into his corn. Mom takes her seat. She puts down the can of Kraft Parmesan Cheese she's holding and bows her head. She says grace to herself.

Dad and I put down our utensils, bow our heads, and say it too, as if we'd intended to all along even though Dad had already eaten a bite. I say to myself, "God we thank you for our daily bread. Itadakimasu*."

Byron has already bitten into his garlic bread by the time we all lift our heads.

"Slow down," Dad says.

"You could tell people when you get home, Lincoln," Mom says. She stares right at me, the dim kitchen light haloing the curves of her shoulders. She's got all the properties of a Coke—in color, in sweetness, in her ability to fizzle out flat when she's exasperated. Mom is a mixture of qualities—all stirred together and bottled up in a five-foot-seven frame.

“Sorry?” I ask. The color is something we share. Black is not a misnomer for us and we stand out, even among Byron and Dad.

“Slow down,” Dad says again.

“Were you at work?” she asks.

Every week I write down my schedule for Mom, and every week she asks me where I’ve been. I’m starting to think this is a Jedi mind trick. Or that she’s trying to catch me in a lie I’m not telling. “No, I was at school.”

“Doing that annie-may thing,” Dad says.

American parents can’t pronounce or comprehend anime, at least not American parents who live in the southern states. It’s AH-KNEE-MAY. Not annigh-may. Not ahnnie-MOO as Mitchell’s dad reportedly pronounces it. And definitely not annie-me like Avery’s Aunt Shannon calls it.

“Yeah, anime,” I say, carefully pronouncing the word. “We’re trying to go to Anime Expo.”

“What’s that?” Byron asks. There’s spaghetti in his corn and corn in his meat. His garlic bread lies limp in a puddle of Ragu, sopping up all the juices, becoming soggy and orangey and disgusting.

“It’s a convention.”

“Like those Star Trek people,” Dad says.

Somehow, being compared to a Trekkie depresses me. “Okay.” I’d like to think anime fans have a little more self-respect than Trekkies, a little more creativity. I’d also like to think that I won’t be a forty-year-old fanboy but a musician, a fan who mixes his love of anime with a love of music.

It depresses Dad too. He stares down at his plate like he's searching for a sign: your son is lost, sir. He's thinking that his son will never date.

I'm thinking, *you wore knee highs and bell-bottom pants. It's not impossible.*

"Well when is 'Anime Expo?'" Mom asks. She twirls pasta around her fork and Parmesans her sauce.

"It's in July." I eat a forkful of spaghetti. The noodles slide down nice and easy.

"You're planning for something that doesn't happen until July? It's January."

"He's always been organized," Dad says. "He gets that from me." Our garage is immaculate; our cars sit in the driveway.

"We have to buy tickets. And other stuff."

"How much are tickets?" Dad asks.

"They're \$68." Half my spaghetti is gone.

"You need a cheaper hobby," Dad says. He's up, getting more.

"It's a four-day, all-day event. Think of it like going to Six Flags. Every day." The convention lasts for four days, but we'll be gone for at least six. I fail to immediately bring this up.

"I want to go to Six Flags," Byron says. He's got spaghetti on his elbow. "We haven't been in forever." Forever means a year when you're eight. Our last family vacation wasn't exactly a thrill for me. I was fine with chaperoning Byron—I like kids. Kids are easy.—but hanging out with my parents nearly killed me.

"That's cheaper than the movies," Mom says. She peppers her spaghetti. There's not enough seasoning in the world for her and there never will be.

"How much are movies now?"

I shrug. “Depends on the theater. Eight or nine, not including the \$20 worth of food. Thirteen for 3D,” I say.

“Hell, no wonder nobody dates,” Dad says. He gets up for full-on seconds.

“Lincoln doesn’t have a girlfriend, anyway.” Byron smiles up at me. I’m going to headlock the hell out of him later.

“I see why,” Dad says. He probably means both the anime hobby and the lack of funds.

“Where’s this expo going to be? The BJCC?” The BJCC, also known as the Birmingham Jefferson Civic Center, is where Birmingham hosts all of its major events, major being when Usher or Taylor Swift or Billy Cosby roll into town. It’s where dreams go to die, so depressing seems this place, so old and worn out that it looks like what a well-loved pair of Converse must feel like: appreciative that someone still wants them, but ready to retire, ready to disappear, ready to be catapulted out of its misery. Anime doesn’t belong in this place.

“Los Angeles.”

Dad retakes his seat. “Where?”

“Los Angeles, California.”

“Funny.”

“I’m serious.”

Mom laughs. “You’re not going to California.” She says this like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. Like she’s a clairvoyant who’s peered so far into my future she’s getting déjà vu.

Dad and Byron both give me a “duh” look.

Because it never once occurred to me that my parents might give me the money to go to Anime Expo, it never occurred to me to ask their permission to go.

“What?”

“You can’t go to California. Want me to say it in Chinese?” Dad asks.

“Why can’t I go?”

“Can’t afford it,” Dad says. Dad works at the Coca-Cola Bottling plant on Beacon, and Mom’s a nurse at Children’s, a part of UAB hospital, UAB being the second largest employer in the state, if my government teacher is accurate, the only larger employer being Redstone Arsenal. Truth be told, my parents could probably afford to send me to California if they were willing to save for it and cut back some. But after what I put them through to transfer me into Vulcan High School, I can’t ask them to do that.

“You guys aren’t invited; I’d be going it alone.”

Every Brown at the table laughs except me. I slump, silently feeling the love I felt for my family falter. It’s like one of those episodes where a lone character’s standing in the darkness and giant, exaggerated heads of his friends appear to taunt him.

“A seventeen-year-old can’t go to California on his own.”

“I’ll pay for it, Mom.”

“You have any idea how much that costs—” Dad begins but I cut him off.

“One thousand, two hundred dollars and seventy-five cents.” On the low-end.

“You don’t have one thousand, two hundred dollars and seventy-five cents,” Dad says.

“You don’t have one hundred and twenty dollars. Your room looks like Guitar Center.” He won’t say it—he’ll leave that to Mom—but he fails to see my guitar playing as an investment. He thinks it’s a hobby, something to do with my *abundance* of free time. He can’t understand what my fingers are trying to say, what I’m trying to communicate to the larger world.

“I’ll save up.”

“You can’t go to California alone. It’s three thousand miles away. You’re seventeen.” Dad has taken to speaking in chopped-up sentences, trying to spoon feed me his reasoning.

“Well, I wouldn’t really be alone. Maes and Avery and Mitchell are going.”

“Their parents are letting them go to California alone?” Mom or Dad asks. At this point, they’re starting to sound the same, asking the same questions.

The four of us never brought up parents. But I answer like I’m one hundred percent certain. “Yes.”

“White folks are crazy,” Dad says. He shakes his head.

“Maes is Korean,” I say. “There’s nothing crazy about independence.”

“There is when it’s three thousand miles away,” Mom says. “All of you are underage.”

“We’re not going to drink, Mom. We’re going to an anime convention to stand around with a bunch of dorks dressed in costumes while we wait for signatures and merchandise.” This is the simplest way to explain it. This is the only way to explain it without raising the alarm *that I have to go to this convention or I don’t think I’ll make it* would sound.

“Doesn’t matter. *You’re* not going.”

“But I’ll pay for it,” I say again.

“Even if we said you could go, you couldn’t. You’re underage,” Dad says.

“We’re not going to be drinking,” I say again. My leg is making quarter beats under the table.

“How do you plan on getting a hotel room?” he asks. He sighs through his nose, as if this discussion has been the most tiring part of his day. He holds down the table. “Stop fidgeting.”

“Huh?” I try to will my leg to stop counting; it won’t.

“You have to be at least eighteen to reserve a hotel room, twenty-one in most places.”

I take this in. Avery, Maes, Mitchell and I are all seventeen-and-under idiots. “What?”

“Did you think hotels give rooms to kids?” Mom asks and smiles, no doubt feeling lucky that her son is stupid enough to have holes in his plans.

“Nice try,” Dad says. “Try again when you’re eighteen.”

Instead of paling, I feel my face fill up and flush red. No one can tell. We can’t go to AX because we can’t buy a hotel room, and it’s not like I can drag my family with me to California. That’s embarrassing even for a dork, and we can’t afford it.

This kind of thing wouldn’t happen in an anime. Japanese teenagers are always going on faraway trips together, trips from Tokyo to Hokkaido with their girlfriends and their friends and their classmates. You never hear parents questioning it or teenagers being told they can’t go. I want that kind of autonomy. I want the ability to save my money, pack my bags, and jump on a plane to California. I want my parents to believe that I can do this. I want the adults in my life to trust me.

Byron asks for more bread. I regret being a Brown.

CHAPTER TWO

I drag my feet to the center of the second-floor hall of Vulcan High School, past a group of girls too hot to be concerned with me, past another group too smart to be concerned with me, and slink to my locker which is, terribly enough, a bottom locker, and I'm nearing six feet and possibly growing, and picking up a pre-calculus book looks like stooping to pray.

Sweet White Jesus, age me one year and I will attend every sermon, every Sunday school, every baptism from now until tomorrow. Just please, please, please let me go to AX so that I can meet Go Igarashi. So that I can tell him how his story changed my life; so I can tell him how much the characters—Ami, Matsuda, Hiko, and Inoue mean to me.

Amen.

When I rise, I see Maes coming my way, her incredibly long hair pouring over her shoulders like a bottle of Sweet Baby Ray's. Maes worships everything before January 1, 2000. She reads *Marmalade Boy* and *Rose of Versailles*^{*} and *Princess Knight*. She prefers the round-faced, round-eyed characters of Makimura Satoru^{*}, or the sparkling-eyed, sharp nose characters of Miuchi Suzue^{*} that remind her of Tezuka Osamu's^{*} work, of the manga guru's love of those wide-eyed all-female theater troupes. The world rests in the eyes, Maes has told me, and when she stops in front of me, dressed like a chimera of decades, wearing limeade Chuck Taylors, a faded purple hippie skirt over her thin waist, her hands showing signs of a late January freeze, her small breasts bundled under a bomber jacket, her eyes two big, brown half-moons, I don't go eye-for-eye. I avoid it.

I shut my locker, turn around, and sit on the floor. The group of girls disperses, a few of them giving me a twice over, probably wondering, more or less, why I'm slouched like I've been

shot and propped against a locker. One day I'll tell Maes it isn't the eyes at all, but something simpler.

She squats to my level. "Well?" Her lips are plump, pouty, and hard not to watch.

"Well what?" My backpack presses into my spine. I shift against the lockers. Those lips shine pink.

"Well, what happened? Can you afford the trip or not?" Maes is as matter-of-fact as they come. Anything other than a yes or no to her sounds suspicious.

She throws her hair over her right shoulder, her way of telling me that she's listening. If she ponytails it, it means I've got her full attention.

"Problem."

"Yes?" Her hair, too thick to be contained, is already falling back into place.

"We're too young to buy a hotel room." As soon as I say this, Mr. Abner walks by like he's been lurking around the corner this entire time, although corner isn't the right word since our school is two interlocking "rotundas," a word left over from SAT prep. He glares at me, like I suggested something way nastier than Maes and I getting a hotel room. It's a good thing I didn't mention octopuses or paddles, or we might have a real situation on our hands.

I say, loudly, and with force. "You know. The two rooms. For you and Avery and me and Mitchell."

Satisfied, Abner taps his wrist—a warning, telling us not to be late for his first period pre-calculus class—and continues his morning patrol, circling the center lockers and heading toward his classroom.

Maes watches him over her shoulder then turns back at me.

I explain to her that, apparently, in the state of California, you have to be at least eighteen

in some places—twenty-one in most places—to rent a hotel room. Even Mitchell, the oldest among us, the seventeen-year-old senior, is one week too young to buy us a room. Maes and I are also seventeen, and young Avery, age fifteen, is practically a trap.

Maes rests one elbow on her thigh and two fingers on her forehead. “Okay,” she says.

“All right. What if we ask our parents to get the room for us?”

“Negative,” I say. “My parents aren’t exactly fond of me going to AX in the first place.”

“Wait. You can’t go?”

“They didn’t say I couldn’t go,” I say. It’s not really a lie. “They implied that they’d prefer if I didn’t go.”

“Then they don’t want you to go.”

“In the grand scheme of things there’s probably a lot of stuff my parents don’t want me to do, and going to AX is among them. But they haven’t said no. We need to focus on the problem at hand here. Which is that we’re all underage.” I don’t want to be the reason we can’t go to AX. I don’t want to ruin it for everybody else.

Maes stands, and I stand with her, holding my pre-calculus book under one arm and my American history book under the other. She walks in the direction of our classroom and I follow, trying to come up with some kind of plan.

“Let’s brainstorm after school,” she says.

“Yeah.”

By the time we reach pre-calculus, Abner is already standing behind his desk, sipping his morning coffee which we believe to actually be a combination of Red Bull, coffee, and Coke the soda, not coke the lifestyle. He nods at Maes, the only student to ever question him aloud, and Maes nods back, nonchalantly, and slides into her desk. I sit behind her.

I have maybe one minute before class begins. I peer past the head of the girl on my left and out the window. All I see are naked trees, so deserted is the lot that surrounds Vulcan High School. But if I close my eyes I can just make out the sounds of Highway 459. I've been playing guitar for long enough to know how to cut out back noise and focus only on the sounds that matter. I ignore the sound of someone running through the hallway—probably an IB, International Baccalaureate, student trying to pass through our non-IB side, what we regular students call Vulcan One. I ignore the sound of the clock ticking closer to eight, closer to the start of one of four, ninety-six minute classes—our insane, alternating A/B block schedule means that I have the pleasure of taking eight classes a year, four on A days, four on B days—as I ignore the sound of the girl beside me breathing.

I can hear it now, the wheels squawking, the mating call of some semi, carrying live chickens or metal rods or waste, the honking of a small car's horn. I want to breathe in, but with my eyes closed I can't tell if someone's watching me, and I'd rather people think I'm napping than deep breathing.

The bell rings, and I open my eyes. Abner is practically punching holes in me. I like the A/B schedule because it means I don't have to see the same people every day for five days a week. I hate the schedule because it means I have to open my eyes to Abner watching me, because I have to listen to Abner talk about functions for ninety-six minutes every other day. Either you understand that X can't be four when Y equals one over X minus four or you don't.

*

“See you.” We leave Abner's class and Maes heads toward the IB side of the school, Vulcan Two, probably to catch a glimpse of Avery—the only one of us to be a full-time IB

student—before she heads back to our side, to Physics. I watch her wade into a wad of students and disappear behind a group of girl jocks, our volleyball team, firm-legged and tightknit. I note, with slight disappointment, that Shanti is not with them.

Shanti is the future mother of my children. In my American Dream equation, which actually takes place in the Kanto region, close to the Yamanashi Prefecture district of Japan, Shanti is there with me, our two Coco Puff-colored children holding onto her arms, our two-story house with the one-car garage nestled behind them. Our neighbors, weary but friendly, wave in the background, smiling at me, the Boy Wonder, and her, God's gift to mankind.

Eyes some sort of hazel, which might be ordinary on a white girl, but dazzle on her darker skin, light enough to see the blue veins, dark enough to tread carefully. Hair curly and coiled, a super fro the size of my ambitions, glowing like the sun, honeycomb-colored and everywhere, begging me to touch it in the distance between her and me, which is, at this moment, greater than if not equal to the distance between me and Japan, me and AX, me and California. When they wrote the song "Name," a year before her birth, they were calling her arrival, they were trumpeting her in, and it's not her eyes or her hair or her legs that got me, but her hands, covered in athlete's tape, one index finger forever drifting toward the right, one middle finger long and bloody and bruised black, the hands of someone who believes in something.

Shanti, mistress of my darkest desires, more real and yet more unattainable than all the anime beauties in the bountiful Sea of Japan. Shanti is not here. Is not in front of me.

I tuck my dreams into my pocket and climb the stairs to American History.

I take my seat in the far left corner of the history class, the "corner" being more of a curve in this school. There are no windows in my section, only posters of moments in histories:

assassinations, famines, bombings, starving mothers and children gazing out at you, begging even though their time is past. I glance to my right and notice Avery is nowhere to be seen.

Avery goes to the smart side, Vulcan Two, while Mitchell, Maes, and I go to the regular side. But because not every smart kid can handle every IB class and not every regular kid is challenged enough in the regular classes, students are allowed to take certain classes in different parts of the school. Since Maes has a real knack for art history, she takes that class over on the other side, while Avery, barely able to remember what day of the week it is and yet a whiz at Dragon Ball*/Z trivia, takes her history classes with me. Mitchell and I are the only two who don't mix and match.

Avery is late to two out of three classes, and she's pretty hard to miss. During those first awkward, long weeks of the school year when I first noticed Maes, when I first noticed Avery, Avery had a habit of changing her hairstyle on a daily basis. And not ponytails and pigtails, but eight buns in rows of two or hair gelled straight up like a Super Saiyan*. She was channeling Haruhi Suzumiya, altering her hair to fit the color of her world.

In *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya**, Haruhi Suzumiya, a high school student, changes her hairstyle every day for about a month because she has this theory that every day has a different energy and a different color associated with it, like Monday is mellow, yellow ribbon day and Wednesday is bright, blue ribbon day, her hair in buns. But that's not the thing I like about Haruhi, and it's not the thing I like about Avery. What I like about Haruhi is that on the first day of class during the introductions, you know, when everyone is a ball of nerves ready to be unraveled by the loose stitching of words said and not said and said incorrectly, she stands and says this: *I'm Haruhi Suzumiya from East Junior High. I'm not interested in ordinary people. But if any of you are aliens, time travelers, or ESPers* please come see me.*

And Avery, I thought, with her weird hairstyles done in complicated twists must be one— an alien, a time traveler, a girl who uses ESP. At least, that’s what I chose to believe.

“For the love of God, Brown,” the dude behind me says, “Tell Miss Dubois you’re here.”

I have broken the first rule of not attracting attention to myself; I have forgotten everyone else in the room. Or, more accurately, I failed to notice that the room suddenly filled with students and Averys and Miss Dubois. I lower myself a little in my seat and say, with a heaping of shame, “Here. Sorry,” but it’s already too late. Something like rocks gathers in my belly. My face feels like a fever.

“We’re all sorry you’re here,” says the dude behind me. This gets him a few laughs.

“I’m not,” Avery says.

The laughs die down and the class, except for me, kind of turns in her direction.

“What?” she asks.

Today, playing the role of Mitchell, we have anal dude behind me. He mutters, “Save that for after class.”

“Emma Burns?” Miss Dubois asks.

Emma raises her hand. Order is restored. I take a moment to glimpse Avery. She shoots me a double thumbs-up.

Well-meaning Avery has saved and embarrassed me, a strange combination that seems nearly impossible. I want to shrug off my jacket to let out some of the heat, but any movement will draw attention. Instead, I simmer.

“Avery McAllister.”

“Here, Miss D.” She waves at Miss Dubois.

Avery is the only one who calls Miss Dubois Miss D. Avery is the only one who calls her

anything but Miss Dubois. The rest of us, out of fear, refuse to even call her Mrs. or shorten the Miss to Ms.

When I watch Avery, I can tell the rich live in another world.

*

I go to my other classes, the teachers teach at me, I leave. I spot Mitchell in the hallway right before fourth period, and since we've already passed each other once today, at lunch—I didn't sit with him. I couldn't, not without him asking about AX—we acknowledge each other the way people acknowledge people they know but don't really want to talk to at the moment: we give a head nod.

When three-fifteen hits I spring out of my seat like a Jack-in-the-box with the hydraulic system of a restored 1967 Crown Victoria. Since I'm normally pretty slow moving, this has the effect of a slug breaking into a run and scares the Southern out of the girl sitting beside me. I half-smile at her to show I'm okay, we're okay. She smiles back, and I ease out of the classroom like a normal, less enthusiastic person.

I take the stairs and stop by my second floor locker before I head to the first floor art room, our usual place of meeting.

When I arrive, I see this:

The room is a rainbow-vomit wash of color. There's the normal pinkeye pink on the six long, wooden art tables and the questionable bloody-nosed red on the gray concrete floor. But there's also acid green on the teacher's desk, blazing yellow on the blackboard behind it, and Sunkist orange on the giant mannequin—I call him Mr. Satomi—who stands in the back corner near the art easels, stools, and steel cabinets. Whatever the art kids have been doing, they've

been making a mess of it.

Avery bends over a table, her legs tucked under her, balanced on a stool. Beside her sits a bottle of ink, a stack of paper, and a collection of premium Copic markers that probably cost more than the amp I spent two months saving up for.

Even though she's kind of sitting, she can't help but twist her body, twist her waist, and this causes the top part of the stool to pivot her from side to side. When she does this, everything below her collarbone trembles.

"Hey," I say. I place my bags on one of the art tables and stand near Avery. I try to avoid ogling from the neck down, but when a girl has Orihime-sized boobs, it's hard.

"Mm, Link-kun." Link-kun, Mitc-chan. Honorifics are the sirs and ma'ams of the East, the Mrs. and Misters of the Land of the Rising Sun. So hospitable are the people of Japan that they have ranks of politeness, ranks of authority, so that your mother is higher than you, your boss higher than her, your prince higher than them both, yourself—small and thin and one of many on an island of many in a place where many of the people appear as small and thin and inconsequential as you—you are the lowest of the low. You are a deep bow at the waist, an eye avoided.

Avery's the only one who calls me Link-kun. She has this idea that adding the honorific to a name instantly makes it better. She has this idea that speaking in the third person makes her more Japanese. We don't bother correcting Avery's usage. Because I'm older than her, her sempai, Link-kun doesn't really fit me and calling big-boned Mitchell, chan—little, cute—is laughable.

Avery blocks in the lines of one of her characters, a thin guy with blonde or white hair in a ponytail. Even though the picture's colorless, I know the hair's either blonde or white because

of the sheen markings she's drawn in. The guy rests under a tree and holds onto a jar.

"Which series are you working on?" I sit across from her.

"All of them. But right now? *Mori Yume*. It's my newest one. It means forest dreams. I think." Avery wants to be a manga artist. She started off by tracing manga covers and making fan comics, doujinshi, based off her favorite series. Nowadays, she makes her own universes. The writing's okay. The drawings are beautiful.

Neither of us speaks Japanese. "Cool. What's it about?"

"It's really about a tree, this tree that grants wishes, but *Ki Yume* doesn't sound as interesting as *Mori Yume*. *Mori Yume* has kind of a feudal feel to it, like *Inu Yasha*."

"Right. Anyway, did Maes tell you?"

"Mm."

"Why aren't you panicking?"

"Because I've got to ink this drawing. Why aren't you?"

"Can't. It would be too out of character." Truth is, I'm all panicked out. I panicked last night after dinner, I panicked this morning while I brushed my teeth, I panicked after the American History Debacle. There's only so much panicking one can do before even a neurotic person says, *Hey, that's enough*.

"Totally out of character," Avery says.

It's nice to be with Avery when she isn't hyped up on life. Drawing calms her down, pours out all of that ADD through her fingertips and onto her page.

I pull up a stool beside her and watch her draw the lines. I can't do what she does. I can't put ideas to paper, drawing worlds through lines. I speak in bends and slides and strums. For me, life happens on a lyrical level. But when I see Avery, huddled over and focusing intensely on her

dream—and it is a dream, to get out, to leave the states and draw up images from a world she’s never seen—I become inspired. My fingers burn. I want to play.

Maes and Mitchell file in, unusually late and together. They both appear a little drained, like they’ve come from somewhere farther than their classrooms to come here.

I nod to the empty stools beside me, and they both sink and sigh.

Mitchell rolls his backpack off his shoulders. Maes pulls out a notebook and a pen from her messenger bag then drops the bag to the floor. She taps the bottom of her pen on her notebook.

Mitchell, Avery, and I give her our full attention.

“Mitchell and I talked about it on the way here,” Maes says. Maes and Mitchell talking. Now that nearly kills me. Mitchell Harris hates me—whatever his reasons are—but will talk to Maes, will listen to Maes even though I think we all know, in the back of our brains, that Maes likes girls and Mitchell Harris is not okay with it.

Maes crosses her legs and sits up straight. “We’re not sure how to fix this.”

If life were an anime, this would be the point where my ears drooped. “Not what I wanted to hear.”

“The issue isn’t that we can’t purchase a hotel room.”

Avery caps her special inking pen. “It’s not?”

Maes does something I’ve never seen her do. She stares at me hard, trying to tell me something telekinetically, before she avoids my eyes. “The bigger problem is that Link’s parents don’t want him to go.”

Once again, I am a problem. I suddenly have crazy legs, the need to move them unbearable. I stretch them out and give them room to work themselves.

“That’s not the point. I can work around that.”

“How can you work around that?” Maes asks. “You can’t avoid this problem.”

“What about a chaperone?” Mitchell asks. “Would that make the Browns feel better?”

“No.” Maes speaks for me. “Lincoln and I have already gone over this. The problem isn’t who we go with but that we’re going at all.”

I fold my arms. “I’m the only one with parent issues?” I go from eye to eye to eye to eye—brown and hazel and blue.

Petite Avery’s the first to speak up. She raises her hand and says, as calmly as she can, “I haven’t asked my parents yet, but I know it’ll be fine, Link-kun, because Avery travels all the time and because Avery has family in California and it’s not really being alone-alone, it’s staying with friends and checking in with Avery’s aunt. Daddy won’t care as long as Avery checks in every day. The convention center’s close by, anyway.”

Avery McAllister is the only child of Chase McAllister. The McAllisters own the second largest grocery store chain in the southeast. Founded in the mid-1800s, the store is nearly as old as the state, and you’d be hard-pressed to find a building in Birmingham that doesn’t have some sort of dedication to the McAllister clan. Avery’s mother, Mary Elizabeth Masters-McAllister, is the granddaughter or niece or cousin to the man who used to own Sundial Bank.

The only thing richer than Avery is my Madear’s Sock-It-To-Me Cake.

We already tossed out the idea of staying with Avery’s California folks. Mitchell and I may not agree on much, but we both agree that we don’t want any charity for this trip, and staying with someone for six days sounds a lot like a handout to us. Call it poor man’s pride, but there’s nothing in the world I want bad enough to have it handed to me by a rich girl from Mountain Brook. It’s one thing if a bag of money falls from the sky; it’s another thing if Avery

has to bankroll our trip.

“You’re good to go then?” Maes asks.

“Yup!” Avery says. She smiles big, and when she does this, she reminds me of Misa Misa from *Death Note*^{*}. Shoulder length, cornmeal-colored hair. Doe-eyes, only Avery’s are a Batman-blue instead of Misa Misa’s robin brown. “It won’t be a problem.”

“My parents won’t mind,” Mitchell says. “Long as I got the money to pay for it. Being a senior and all, they’re pretty lax with coming and going nowadays.” Mitchell lives with his mom. His dad owns a store up in Cullman, which is Boogeyman County for me. It’s the kind of place, I’ve been told, not to go to. You find out in a city like this, in a state with a history plump with hatred and racism, that there are certain places you can’t go and don’t want to be as a darker than black kid. Mitchell speaking of it has nothing to say but “s’all right.” And a part of me wants to believe him, the part of me that wants to believe that all people are innately good and that my worst fears are overrated, perpetuated by boogeymen that are less common than I think. But the neurotic, paranoid part of me—the smart, stay-alive part of me—tells me to tread with caution. Because while Mitchell is bearable, I don’t think I could handle much more than his two hundred and forty pounds.

“It’s on you, Maes,” I say, and I make sure to stare even though I know that means I’ll have to keep staring, hard and loud. I want her to hear me through the silence of our minds: *don’t leave me to drown*.

“I need to talk to my parents.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Maes works for her father. She doesn’t say what she or he does, but she’s mentioned, more than once, that she doesn’t deserve the pay she’s getting.

She could never leave me alone. In the end, it's her and me. In the end, our parents might be the problem. But Maes is smart. Maes won't ask her parents until she's sure they'll say yes. Or until she's got a lie worked out, till she's able to tell them, with the straight face she's known for, that she's staying with Avery's family.

"Okay. I beg." That lie's not going to work for me.

"Thought begging was beneath you," Mitchell says.

"Desperate times."

"Avery doesn't like this mood," Avery says. She props her hands on the table and kicks herself off the stool, flying backward. She lands on her feet, picks up her bag and pulls out a manga. She holds it over her head. "Da da da DUM! Volume one of *Aishiteruze Baby!*"

Mitchell and I both lean forward to stare at the cover. There's a blonde kid, probably around our age, and a little girl, probably five. The cover is pink and baby blue and Easter yellow. In the top right corner, nearly unnoticeable, is the Shoujo Beat logo, which—if the images weren't enough of an indication—tells us that this manga is meant for girls, *shoujo*.

"What's this crap?" Mitchell asks.

"It's not crap," Avery says. She grins. "It's *Aishiteruze Baby!* and it's about this boy named Kippeï who ends up having to take care of his little cousin, Yuzuyu."

This is not Avery's usual cup of green tea.

"I'm not reading that," Mitchell says.

I hold out my hand and Avery gives me the manga. I flip through the pages. High school kids in *fuku*—uniforms—preschoolers playing outside, a love interest. It's the stuff *shoujo* is made of. I hand the book back to her.

"It's Avery's turn to trade up after we finish mine. And if Avery wants to read this we

should read this,” I say.

“Pansy.”

“Excuse me?” Maes asks him.

“Nothing.”

In the time it takes for me to be unable to decide whether I want to call Mitchell a dumbass or a SOB, Avery props herself on her stool, slides across the art table, jumps off, and bites Mitchell on the ear. Mitchell has to struggle not to tip over on the stool.

Maes looks like she’s seen a blind, three headed ogre with a keen sense of smell and is trying to decide whether it would be wiser to stand still and hope he doesn’t sniff her out or whether she should be the sacrificial lamb and say something.

Mitchell, for his part, takes this like a trooper, which says something because I know, for a fact, that no girl has ever been this close, this intimate, this beautiful with Mitchell, and the part of him that probably wants to push her away because this is wrong or weird or at least naturally deserving of outrage fights furiously with the part of him that is probably aroused, concerned, and wishing this display didn’t have an audience.

Eventually, he decides to cock-block himself. He reaches out to push Avery away, but before she’ll even give him the satisfaction of extra physical contact, she jumps back.

She stares up at him with those blue eyes of hers. She’s poised to fight, hands out in front of her, not in fists but in Jet-Li style combativeness. I swear to God, I can almost hear her say *be like water*.

Mitchell holds onto his ear. He’s not in pain, at least not the kind that would warrant a bandage. Any pain he’s feeling is probably south of the border and too embarrassing to address at the moment.

Maes scolds Avery, Avery watches the floor, ashamed, and I wonder why it is we can never seem to have an ordinary trading session. I open up my backpack and pull out volume one of *En*, Go Igarashi's latest work. I feel bad enough for Mitchell that I end up giving him the volume without the usual back and forth. "Here," I say.

When we all met back in August, back in early September, before we were really talking, I spent a lot of time reading manga out on the steps in front of the school. Because I'm the one who drives Byron to school, this was early in the morning, way before most of the other four hundred students even thought to wake up. The thing about Vulcan is that it's really two schools in one, where "knowledge is forged by compassion." Any school with that grand an idea has to have an equally grand entrance, and thus the building reclines on top of a large, rolling hill. The walk up is rough, and I feel like Spike in the *Mushroom Samba* episode, where's he's drugged up on shrooms and thinks he's traveling an endless, glorious, stairway to heaven.

To reward myself for the trek, I usually stopped at the top steps, sat back, and pulled out a manga. One morning, Maes caught me reading *YuYu Hakusho**. Instead of ignoring me, she squatted behind me and read over my shoulder. She didn't ask me to start over, she didn't say hello, she simply read. So I read on.

Maes placed her hand on the page and held it down. When I glanced up at her, I saw her eyes, brown as my own, traveling down the page.

I read over the same scene. By the time I got to the end of it, Maes lifted her hand—long, I thought, really long—from the page and settled back behind me. I turned the page. I read. I waited. Maes creaked forward in her sneakers. I flipped another page and we formed a rhythm: flip, silence, squeak, flip, silence, squeak.

This went on for a couple of days, really, all the way up to volume four. And just when

I'd gotten used to the rhythm, just when I'd gotten used to Maes, Avery showed up.

Maes put a finger to her lip, a warning: quiet hour, she told Avery. Avery complied. I gave her volume one of *YuYu Hakusho* and she sat on Maes's step and read. She couldn't be completely silent—it wasn't in her character—but her laughs were tempered by her hand, her snorts were covered with a nose pinch.

Pretty soon, Mitchell joined us. Avery gave him volume one, I gave Avery volume two, and Maes and I continued to read on.

Before I knew it, before any of us knew it, we had a thing going, a manga trade off. We were all sitting around reading the same book or the same collection of books. When I ran out of *YuYu Hakusho* volumes, Maes brought in *Sailor Moon*. When she ran out of *Sailor Moon*, Mitchell brought in *Full Metal Panic!* On and on we went, trading volumes and reading them until we were all caught up, all the while talking about *holy shit, I can't believe he did that* and, *seriously, I died laughing when I read that part*. Before we knew it, in the early hours of the morning, well before the eight A.M. bell, on dawns growing colder and darker by the days, we became lords of our own world, the manga lords on a hilltop, laying claim to the stories in our hands.

Mitchell stares down at the cover of *En*. He stares up at me, mouth open enough for me to see a cavity. Avery and Maes gather around.

“You bought it?”

“Yup.”

“Shit.” He touches the cover. Avery leans over him, her front almost pressed to his back, and I can't tell if Mitchell's hands shake because of Avery or because of Go Igarashi.

Kenny Thomas is a black kid living in San Francisco, California, in 1947. He finds a

bottle with a letter written in hiragana. He discovers that when he holds the letter toward the falling sun the hiragana turns to English, words he can read. The letter is written by a Japanese kid named Kenji Yamada who lives in Hiroshima, Japan. Kenji is hibakusha, an atomic bomb survivor, and his letter asks for help. Kenji's family is starving, the water is unclean, the nation's in a panic. Kenny writes a response, places the letter into the bottle, and wedges the bottle back in the sand dune he found it.

Kenji returns to his cove in Hiroshima and finds the bottle with Kenny's letter inside. He's elated. He can't read the characters—the Roman alphabet—until he holds the letter toward the rising sun. And that's how the story goes, with Kenny and Kenji exchanging letters across space, with a friendship born between two people who are thousands of miles apart.

I've never read anything like it. I love anime and manga and the worlds I've read about. I love shounen and slice-of-life and sci-fi. But for everything I love about manga and anime—and there's a ton to love—I always hated that none of the characters looked like me. It was always the same as with America—pale heroes in costumes, heroes I have to close my eyes to be. But Kenny is different. Kenny's like me. Go grew up in Hawaii. After the bomb dropped—it killed his mother and his brother. His father, Ippei, died in a fire—Go was taken by missionaries. They helped him locate his relatives in O'ahu, and Go lived sixteen years on the island. He met all kinds of people—Japanese, Chinese, white, Hawaiian, black, Filipino—and he never forgot about them. He puts them in his books. He colors his worlds.

This won't mean as much to Maes, Mitchell, or Avery, but it means a lot to me. It means the whole goddamned world to know that somebody notices you. The four of us, varied as we are in taste, varied as we are in our commitment to anime and manga—Maes can go weeks without reading, and Mitchell, much as he loves his mecha, would give up half of it for *Firefly* to return

to Fox—love Go Igarashi. But this time, I love him a little more.

This is rumored to be Go's last work. He's going to retire soon, they say, and at seventy-four-years-old, I guess I can understand that. But before he retires, he wants to take one last trip to America, his first one in nearly fifty years. Anime Expo. It's our first and last and only chance to see him.

Mitchell pushes back the cover. He reads. Avery wanders back over to her art table and finishes up her drawing. Maes and I work on our pre-calculus. It's a quiet hour. I run over ideas while solving equations. If I promise to chat with my parents every day, can I go? If I promise to check-in with Avery's relatives, can I go?

Mitchell and Maes eventually get up to leave, Mitchell to Sloss for work, and Maes to wherever Maes is heading. Avery and I are all that is left, and it only takes us another ten minutes before we follow Mitchell and Maes's lead. By the time four-thirty approaches, Avery loops her arm through mine and we head out of the art room. I have to nearly dislocate my shoulder to move away from her.

"You're no fun, Link-kun."

"People will talk," I say. Avery likes to touch. She pulls back with Mitchell sometimes, mainly because we all know Mitchell's one step away from deserting us, and while I may not like Mitchell—I don't—I don't want to be left alone with Maes and Avery. I need another guy around.

"Why, because you're chocolate and I'm vanilla?"

We're toe to heel as we wheel around a curve, and the bubblegum perfume Avery wears isn't enough to hide the stench of the cleaning solutions the janitors use.

"You make us sound delicious."

“We are delicious. We’re like Pocky* . Only better. But if Avery is a Pocky flavor she’s more strawberry than vanilla. Vanilla’s tame. Actually, Link-kun’s more vanilla.” She wears a cat-eared trapper hat with bells on the end, and the bells jingle every time she moves. We’re practically making music.

“What flavor is Mitchell?” I ask.

She runs past and opens the doors that separate Vulcan One and Vulcan Two for me, every bit the southern gentleman. I give her a slight bow and a half smile, and she gives me a toothy grin in return. Her teeth shine square and white, and I wonder whether it’s from genes or gentry.

“Mitchell is,” she says as she flexes. “Mitchell is man-flavored Pocky.” This flavor really exists, and it doesn’t taste rugged or hearty or even savory. It tastes bitter.

“Don’t want.”

“Everyone wants a taste of Mitchell’s Man Pocky, Link-kun.”

“That sounds sexually suggestive to the utmost.”

She snickers and covers her face with her hands, which are covered in black ink. Her blonde hair is dirty. Her small fingers are dirty. Her clothes—an unzipped North Face jacket, dark blue jeans, red rain boots—have seen better centuries.

“You’re dressed like a billion yen.”

“Avery always does her best for company. What Avery means is, her aunt’s picking her up today. She’s being a big meanie about her staying out late all the time.” Avery pulls off her hat. She zips up her North Face jacket, closing in boobs so large I wonder how they fit.

“What safer place can you be than at school?”

“Oh, you know.” She pushes open the heavy metal doors at the front of the building and

the cold wind plays drums on my teeth. I shiver. Avery's ears twitch in the cold. I gaze down at the one hundred and seventy-nine steps that slink up the top of the hill our school is built on. Browning grass and green weeds grow through the cracks in the concrete. A few students linger, but the teachers have all cleared out. Cigarette butts and smashed red and blue bottle caps are strewn along the edges of the steps and the patches of dirt that show between the five-inch tall grass that makes up the hill. I glance around. The place doesn't look rough. It looks lived in. And suddenly, I know what I've been meaning to ask Avery since the day I met her.

"How'd you even get in this school?" She's not from around here, not that I am, either. We're both transfers, latecomers to Vulcan, the progressive school with year-long classes that students pick themselves. But for her, it's different. She may not be from Overton Road, but she isn't claiming Birmingham, either. I'll say it again: money bleeds from this girl. Real money, not the kind I can imagine. Old, Southern money. Yet, here she is on the steps of Vulcan High, not a poor high school but not the richest one, either.

She turns on her toes, tipsy, an answer on her tongue, and smiles at me. "It's actually very simple, my dear." She knows exactly what I'm getting at: What's a resident of the Tiny Kingdom—Mountain Brook, AL— doing in a place like *this*?

She balances on her toes. She holds her arms straight out, pushes her shoulders straight back, and walks a tightrope only she can see. "Mommy wanted to prove we weren't insulated." She turns and bounces down the steps, those blonde waves bobbing behind her, her hat fisted in her hand.

"Insulated," I say. I pull my coat closer to my body and follow.

"Insulated. You know, that her child has a dash of liberalism—but no more than a dash. We are conservatives, after all. This is a red state," she says, taking on a British accent. I'm

finding out that she loves her accents almost as much as she loves her pronouns.

I travel the narrow trail she's leaving for me.

"I can get along with blacks." She drops the third-person. She's way too comfortable with me, and I wonder if it's because I don't seem like a threat.

"I can get along with poor whites. I can go to a school besides Mountain Brook High School." Mountain Brook High School is about as exclusive as it gets. Families will buy a forty-thousand-dollar house for three hundred thousand dollars for that Tiny Kingdom zipcode, that reassurance that their child is going to one of the best, if not *the* best, schools in the Greater Birmingham area.

"Well, we sure are lucky to have you."

"That's a joke, isn't it?"

"You tell me." We reach a small platform. We're halfway there.

"See? We get along fine." She faces me, but continues moving. It's amazing, watching her feet. Left glides over right. Her heels never touch the floor. It's hypnotic and I know she's going to fall flat on her ass and I'll have to help her up and it'll be awkward and embarrassing for me but completely unnerving for her because she's used to this. She's used to being a center, and I'm used to standing way the hell behind the fence and past outfield, praying nobody sees me, nobody asks me anything, so that I can skirt by in high school without ever having to account for much of anything.

"The truth is there are nice and naughty people everywhere. Where Avery's from is no different," Avery says. "It's only that Avery tends to see more of the naughty than the nice. But maybe Avery's jaded. Or maybe insulated's the better term."

"Maybe," I say. I'm careful with my words. "You seem like a good person. But I am the

only black kid you hang with,” I say.

“It’s kind of like *Alice 19th**, right? You’re Billy. The black character. I’m Alice. I’m good, and I accept you for who you are.”

“And that makes Maes Mei Lin?”

“She’d have to be, wouldn’t she?” Avery stumbles but turns and doesn’t fall. “Mommy has to do it, you know. To prove that she isn’t a horrible human being.”

“Is she a horrible human being?” I ask.

“I don’t know. I don’t know her very well.”

Places like the Tiny Kingdom—Mountain Brook, AL—are one giant infestation bubble. I mean, think about it. You become sick, you never leave your bedroom, and of course you’re going to stay sick. It’s the same thing for people who might have been well meaning but only stay in that one circle, talking to the same people who do the same things they do, like what they like, dress like they dress. If you start going to the park, to the movies, to the Birmingham Opera and you see only people you know then that should be the first sign. Sign of trouble. You’re trapped in a bubble so tight you can’t see the pin coming to let the air out. You can’t see that you’re one push away from exploding.

It’s the same in the poor black neighborhoods, only usually it’s got less to do with choice and more with the kind of real estate you can afford. Still, there are some people who see a white person and figure it must be a very unfortunate UPS driver or a guy who owns but doesn’t run the rundown building on the corner or the guy in a business suit who’s come by on his lunch break to grab Church’s or Popeye’s because there’s not one within six miles of his neighborhood and that’s being generous. Gazing at the Tiny Kingdom and glancing at what’s west of I-65 is like peering up to see the sun shining and then peeking down to see a tornado has hit. But it’s

always been that way. The rules changed, the zonings changed, but the infestation remained. Only the middle kingdoms tell the truth: that Birmingham is black and white, that people who look like me and people who look like Avery are all gunning for the same thing. Survival.

Avery takes me all the way to my car. She's a good boyfriend, and I'm tempted to tell her this, but I know she'll take it as an opportunity to hug me or try to have me loosen up to her like Maes does, and I'd rather not have any of that. The three of them are still strange to me, united only by a common obsession, and like all good Browns, I know not to make fast friends. Any relationship worth keeping is worth developing, and I want to make sure Avery knows that.

She hugs me tight around the waist before I can say anything at all.

"I'm not a hugger."

"You're skin and bones," she tells me, which is hilarious because I can literally see the dips in her collarbone. Only her boobs, big, pressed against me, qualify as "fat." I don't mean to, but I savor this feeling of girl. For a moment.

"For the love of all that is animated, please let me go."

She lets go. "For the love of Spongebob." She salutes me.

"For all of Bikini Bottom." I salute her.

"Dork."

"Pillow biter."

"Punk."

"Brookie."

"Peasant."

"Is that your Lexus over there?" I ask. I nod toward a two-tone white and gold C-class Lexus that sits idle. The woman on the driver's side, lips unrealistically red, cheeks as rose-

colored as the glasses Avery uses to see through to the good in life, is dead asleep.

She nods. “Piece of shit, ne?” She knocks on the hood of my car. “Nice car, by the way.”

“I know.” I fold my arms and lean back against my car door.

“Oh yeah, you’re so gangster in a Ford Focus.” My car’s black, clean enough you could eat out the ashtray, and packed with everything from “Ride on a Shooting Star” by the pillows* to a rehashed version of Grieg’s “Morning Mood” to a ton of anime OSTs* .

“Forty miles to the gallon, bitches.”

She snorts. “Maes would have Link-kun by the balls for saying *bitches*.”

“Maes can’t even stomach balls unless they’re animated.”

“The corn. The corn!” Avery yells and practically doubles over in a half-shriek, half-cackle.

Boku no Seku, a terrible, horrible, awful yaoi—man love—anime that does nothing for gays and does even less for agriculture, has a scene where one of the guys shoves an ear of buttered corn up another guy’s ass. Avery thought it would be funny to send a gif of it to Mitchell and me since I, offhandedly, mentioned that any aerial shot of our school seems like two pale butt-cheeks converging.

“It’s officially time for me to get the hell out of here.” I open my car door and slip inside. Avery curls her fingers around the top of the door.

“I like you, Link-kun.”

I crank up the car. “Go home.”

She gives me her biggest smile of the day. A Gin Ichimaru smile. Something sinister and alarming and so terrifying that you have to respond to it. You have to go toward it, even though you know—figure, guess— it’s pulling you closer to doom.

I smile back at her, but I don't show any teeth. I honk my horn once for goodbye and once more to see if I can't wake up her aunt. Then, I drive off.

*

The Guitar Shop is a half-mile away from the Pinnacle Shopping Center in Trussville, Alabama, which isn't but fifteen minutes from school, twenty-five minutes with traffic. The shop isn't very big and doesn't have half the business that Guitar Center—across the street from the Pinnacle—gets, but our customers are loyal and the atmosphere doesn't feel nearly as stuffy. We sell everything from flutes to cymbals to drums, but what we're known for is, of course, guitars. Telecasters, jumbos, Stratocasters, dreadnoughts. My job is to set up customers with the future loves of their lives. And I'm very good at my job.

Not that I don't receive the occasional gawk. I'm young, I'm black, my shoestrings are color-coordinated. What could I know about guitars? Well, a lot. I know that guitar is the blues that went solo, that the music of Elvis was the music of blacks before Elvis was Elvis, before Les Paul and everyone else even knew what they were really doing, right about when Rickenbacker started making archtops and jazz started doing all those crazy things with riffs and beats.

It might have been Pink Floyd's "Astronomy Domine." It reminded me of asteroids in space. Of dirty dishes in the sink, of unclean carpets and kids who stayed out late, of parents who didn't care because caring was too much of a commitment, too much of a giving. It felt like peaches and sour apples, like the first thing you see when you wake up in the morning. A bright light in an empty space. All these things I couldn't put into words then.

It could have been Hendrix's "Third Stone from the Sun," with its jazzy intro, with its school day feeling—that recess kind of feeling, that last bell kind of feeling, an expedition around the basketball court, a first kiss by the monkey bars, a first feel behind the garden shed.

Then, two and a half minutes in, a sigh, another beat, an introduction to jazz, a gateway drug into cool.

It could have been either of these songs or a Beatles song or some other song I can't remember, some sound that's been pushed out by all the other sounds in my head. All I know is, it began with space rock, a galactic high that capitulated me into the guitar, that gave me a six string beast. It might have been Hendrix or Floyd or The Beatles who got me first but by the time I was eight—by the time I was old enough to know that music is something you hear, feel, touch, taste, and smell—I was watching *Cowboy Bebop*, a space western, a musical homunculus made up of jazz and rock and bebop and ballad and blues. I was in love with Yoko Kanno—Kanno, not Ono, not Lennon's love, but another Japanese wonder woman, another Nipponized sound machine come to make music—I was in love with music. “The Real Folk Blues,” “Call Me, Call Me,” “Want It All Back,” “No Reply,” “Gotta Knock a Little Harder.” Song after song a masterpiece. Sound after sound a calling. When I heard Mai Yamane sing “Blue” for the first time—when I watched the last episode of *Cowboy Bebop*—I didn't speak for hours. I locked my door. I picked up my guitar—my uncle's, actually the first instrument I ever had—and tried to make the notes that could help carry that voice, carry that weight.

That was it for me. Manga and anime, manga, anime, and music, the three were wed, an orgy of excellence. I couldn't think of one without the other. I listened to Malice Mizer and Asian Kung-Fu Generation and B'z and Melt Banana and Luna Sea and the pillows, the pillows which put me on some new, secondary high, indie pop rock. I was gone. I was making soundtracks for anime that didn't even exist yet, only existed in manga pages.

I'm going to be a rock star. I'm going to be big in Japan.

I open up a box of metronomes in the back of the shop. It's inventory day, and while my

boss deals with customers, I deal with box after box of merchandise.

The back room is dungeon damp. The heater's been broken for three days now but Mr. Cory, the guy who leases our building, hasn't sent anybody out to fix it yet. The front room's comfortable enough because of all the body heat and instruments—Myrtle, my boss, is providing twenty-five percent of the warmth—but we don't like having such a noticeable dip in temperature between the two rooms. If it gets hot enough, the glue that holds down the bridge will heat up and slide off. If it gets colds enough—if it goes to really cold to really hot really quickly—same result.

I keep my coat on. From five till ten I unpack, count, and account for amps, pedals, metronomes, strings, and picks. I help customers and I vacuum the floor and I organize the string wall. I wonder how much it costs to rent a sound booth. I wonder if I'll ever convince Maes to make music with me. I wonder what the theme song for *The Haunting* should sound like. The same kind of sound that hide and Pata make in "Voiceless Screaming." You can hear the steel of the strings and the vibration in the acoustics. The guitar screams. That kind of sound, maybe.

I'm home by ten-thirty. I throw my bags into my room and I shut my eyes and try to think what the guitar gods would do to get themselves to Anime Expo. I imagine Skyping my parents with Maes and Avery and Mitchell watching. I imagine meeting Avery's California relatives. I shut my eyes and take a breath. The smell of hamburgers slinks up stairs like a shoujo love interest.

*

I go downstairs, right as Mom plates the hamburger she's cooked special for me. I can see Byron from the kitchen, sitting in the great room, sitting in front of the television, pretending to do homework.

Before I can take my plate and before I can say thank you for the meal, Percy, my older brother, sits at the table, picks up a bottle of ketchup, and squirts it onto my plate. He eats a French fry. “Work?”

I sit beside him and pull my plate in front of me. He snatches up another fry. “Why are you here?”

“I can’t come home?” he asks.

Percy is twenty-six. He’s the manager at the T.J. Maxx in Crestwood, near where the old Red Lobster used to be, right across from the vacant Century Plaza mall.

The kitchen fan whirls on low, and steam rolls off my hamburger buns and salt crystals sparkle on my fries, fresh from the oil. I thank Mom for my meal and she goes about cleaning up the kitchen, setting the hot oil on the back burner, wiping stray crumbs off the kitchen counter.

“Sell any guitars?” Percy eats another fry.

I dip one in ketchup. “A kid came in and bought a beginner’s acoustic.” I don’t want to tell him I spent most of the day unpacking boxes. I bite my hamburger. If taste buds could sing, they’d be singing words of praise.

“Look at the kid calling someone else a kid.”

I take another bite of burger. Byron laughs from the other room. I hear Painty ask if he’s ready. He responds, “Aye Aye, Captain.”

“They pay you okay?”

“You’ll pay me better?”

“Nobody likes a smartass.”

Mom glares at him, and he pretends he said something else. She walks over to the sink and starts in on a pan. She pulls it from the dishwasher, scrubs it with a dirty dishrag.

“I heard you’re trying to go to California.” Percy leans back in his chair a bit.

It’s easier to answer yes to Percy’s questions than it is to try to argue with him. “Yeah. I guess.” We’re on different levels, he and I, him being a black Johnny Walker, moseying around with social graces imbedded in his DNA, some of it siphoned off of Byron and me so that we barely have any between us, me being, more or less, for an easy comparison, a black Peter Parker, only without spider powers or super intelligence or Mary Jane.

“Nobody likes a defeatist, either.” He leans on the table, his right arm supporting the weight of his head.

“Yeah.” I take another bite of my hamburger. What I like about Percy is also what I hate about him: that he’s fucking likeable. Even now, when he’s bothering me, he’s not harassing me. He’s not name calling or trying to force too much of a rise out of me. He’s being Percy. Asking questions. Trying to pick at answers. I like him for that. I hate him for that.

Mom must see it slightly differently. “Leave Lincoln alone,” she says. “He’s sad because he can’t go.” She wipes her hands on a dry rag and cracks her back. Her shift at UAB will commence in the next hour, which means I won’t be able to see her again till either Wednesday or Thursday. She leans against the counter. Coffee bubbles beside her, and her tumbler, green and covered in yellow polka dots, rests on the counter.

“I’m not sad, and I’m still thinking of ways around that.”

“You can’t buy a hotel room, and I don’t feel comfortable with you going to California without us.”

I eat. This is not an impossible mission. It’s not. Mom will fold, I know she will. Yes, she has the resolve of an army general, and yes, her winning streak is over nine thousand, but I refuse to give up on this. I refuse.

Percy pokes out his lips, pity apparent to the point of being diabolical.

He gets it easy in life. Girls like him, our parents like him, teachers like him. He moves with an unnatural swagger. He's in school now, working on his BA in Communications, and it seems odd that he needs a degree in something he's already mastered, the art of always knowing the right words, the right moves, the right paths. T.J. Maxx is only a small stepping stone to him. Maybe it's not the most impressive job in the world, but the customers love him, the store is always packed, and he's got more "Excellent Service" awards than an Olympian has medals.

I'm hoping some of that perfect will rub off on me, that maybe one day I'll be able to have the carefree life of a young bachelor, a lover, someone who lives in the world instead of running from it.

I stretch out my thumb. When my thoughts fog up, I stretch out my thumb.

Mom sets her coffee cup into the coffee holder and presses a button. She travels to the great room and shuts off the television; Byron whines.

"Let me give you a little advice," Percy says to me, like he's been waiting for just the right moment to drop some brotherly knowhow. "If you want to go on this trip of yours then you have to win over Mom."

"Great advice."

He takes no less than four fries. "You need to prove to her that you're responsible enough to go."

"They let you go to Colorado without them."

"I went on a class trip. You're going with the cast of the Power Rangers." He eats my fries.

"Funny."

“Would you let you go? Didn’t you just have a situation—.”

“I don’t want to talk about that.” I drop the half of the burger I’m holding and lean forward in my seat. There’s buzzing behind my right eye, like the kind I have when I’m tired and I’ve stared at a computer for too long. The whole world seems dull and bright at the same time.

“Lincoln?”

I feel my brother move nearer. I feel nauseous. It’s not just the one eye anymore and the kitchen is spinning but I need to keep it checked. I can’t blank out now. If I do, it’ll only prove that I’m incapable of going to California. I try to focus like I’m Goku from *Dragon Ball Z*. He spends a third of the series focusing all of his energy, distributing where he needs it most. He’s a master of meditation. I need that same kind of concentration.

I hear Mom’s feet. The concentration must be working, because the footsteps sound heavier than usual. She’s heading my way and my brother—and my brother Percy, person that I understand the least—does me a solid. He throws an arm around my shoulder and pulls me up. He pushes my head down. The floor spins but I don’t say anything, and I imagine from Mom’s perspective it must look like he’s got me lovingly pinned.

Percy laughs for no reason.

“Where are you two going—Lincoln, I know you’re not done eating. I see half a burger on this plate.”

I can hear the laughter in Percy’s voice. “He’s got something he owes me upstairs.”

Percy doesn’t wait for a response. He gets me up the split level’s stairs, down the narrow hall that leads to my bedroom. He practically tosses me onto my bed.

“Like hell you need to go to California alone.” He’s not laughing now.

I look up at my ceiling. There are no plastic stars from childhood. Instead, there are

quotes written in small, careful letters. I've written the opening to *Full Metal Alchemist* and the ending to *Bebop*. I've written what Go says—*Remembering is the most powerful tool we have*. I glance all around me and see Spike and Ana and Edward Elric. I don't feel nauseous anymore. I hear my brother ask me if I'm okay. I hear him say that I need to figure out how to fix whatever's happening to me or he's going to tell our parents.

I shut my eyes. I'm one hundred percent okay. It's a long moment before I open my eyes again—ten minutes, fifteen—but when they're open, Byron's at my bedside, holding a book.

I stare at him through my eye's corner. "The door was unlocked?"

He nods. "The door was unlocked. Mom's mad at you. You didn't clean your plate."

I sit up on my bed, swing my legs over the edge. I sigh. "Uh huh." I squint at the book he's holding. It's a sheet music book from my shelf.

"I told you about going on my shelf."

"E. A.D. G. B. E," he says, reciting the string order for the guitar. He grins. There's a tooth missing. He lost it in a soccer match, but it was time to come out, anyway.

Because it's a distraction, I signal for him to come closer. He complies. He sits on my bed.

"Say it backward."

He tilts his head to the right and squints one eye. He says, slowly, "E. B. G. D." He stops.

I take my book for him. "When you can say it ten times forward and backward I'll teach you."

He falls out onto my bed and kicks. "That's going to take forever."

I watch him rolling around, kicking my pillows. All that energy. "Why don't you become a drummer instead?"

He sits up. “Drumming?”

“Yeah,” I say. “We’ll start a band with Maes.”

“Name?” he asks. “What are we going to call it?”

I think. Two black kids and a Korean girl. Seventeen, eight, seventeen. “Hybrid Rainbow 17-8.”

He high-fives me. I like him so much better than Percy.

*

The wind eats through my shoes, the oldest pair I own, so old the soles have started to consider retirement options, to talk up plans of hitching a trailer and moving down to South Florida. The garage feels cold and damp, a late night freeze slipping under the mechanical doors, wheezing like dry ice.

I close the door that connects the garage to the house, go past a wall of tools—organized, neatly, by shape, function, and necessity—and past another wall of gray shelves, housing, row by row, indications of a southern climate—a trimmer, ant bait, Miracle-Gro, a bike pump, and, almost suspiciously, a backup generator—and carry Castro and an empty pail over to Dad’s worktable. I need time to think. To figure out what to do about AX.

My conversation with Percy didn’t help. He wants me to prove I’m responsible to Mom and Dad, but he failed to mention how I might go about that. I’m in school, I work, I don’t know what more I can do. Yeah, I’ve had issues lately—problems with focusing and other stuff—but I’m a good son. I mow the lawn. I do laundry. I took care of that stray corgi Byron brought home, the one he named Lewis, the one that I fed and walked and cleaned up after for a week. Am I an A student? No, but neither are a lot of people. I try. I do my work. I don’t get suspended.

I switch on the overhead—a single bulb, bright as the concrete is cold—and clear off

Dad's worktable, the few pens and wrenches and tape measures, and file them away. I switch on the table heater and sit it on the floor. I cover the table in a clean towel I've brought with me then go over to one of the shelves, pull down a small, wooden table rest, and place it on top of the towel before I nestle Castro's neck into its grooves. I unstring Castro, one string at a time, starting with the low E, releasing the tension from the tuners. Once E's loosened up at the head, I move down to the bridge to cut the string and remove the sound peg so I can pull out the string from the bottom up.

It's quiet at eleven-thirty at night, the time I wait to restring, the time when there's no Byron to bother me, no Dad to joke with because he's trying to catch a few dreams before his morning at Coca-Cola. Mom's working the nightshift at UAB, sipping cups of coffee with the other nurses, asking the other nurses what their kids are up to and not asking me, for the four hundred and ninety-eighth time, to focus on something other than anime and music.

It's no wonder I get a little stage fright when my own mother doesn't believe in my music. And it's not just that she doesn't believe; it's that she hates it. She thinks I'm setting myself up to fail, like there's no way on Earth I'll ever be able to do anything with my music. To her, it's just noise unless it's backing up a church hymn.

I use a little force to pull out the peg, careful not to snap the string, careful not to scrape the bridge.

She's part of the stage fright problem. I'm enticed by lights, hypnotized by beats, carried away by the twelve bar notes of blues. The brights, the colors, the sounds that surround a platform, cut through an audience, curl up onto the stage. All of that, I want all of that. But the thought of it is numbing; the thought of all those eyes on me, on my music, on the sound I create as a contract between me and some higher force: a god, the muse, Lady Music.

I have no worries about fucking up. My accidentals remain accidentals—I know exactly where to place my fingers to get my guitar to talk dirty with me, to belt out a truth I didn't know needed telling. But the eyes—brown eyes and blue eyes and green eyes and gray eyes—the eyes are asking too much of me. If I were sure they saw only music—because yeah, music is something you can see as much as you can hear—if I were sure their bodies were bodies that were locked onto sound—I could play a mad song. I could play the best song.

But I'll never know how much they expect from me. As a musician, as a seventeen-year-old black kid from Birmingham, Alabama, a place that isn't the woods, isn't as redneck as people think it might be but may be as bad, a submarine under the surface, an anger only showing its head on special occasions, like that Christian who only comes to church on Easter Sunday or Christmas Day, all decked out to the nines as if that's ordinary, anticipated. And maybe I'm sensitive, maybe I'm overthinking it, but I have the feeling—from seeing, from thinking, from doing—that when you are black and male and bred in Birmingham, every little fuck up is worth broadcasting as a testament to the entire race. If I fall, we all fall, but if I rise, I am an exception, not a rule, and nobody will give a shit, will advertise that. I am the Goku among humans, the one alien—born on a warring planet, bred for destruction—who isn't trying to annihilate the earth but save it.

And that's a scary thing, a very scary thing compounded by a mother who can't see that this scary thing is exactly what I need.

I work my way to the B. I've learned to love the snapping, plucking sound the string makes when I pull it from the bridge—something easy in the breaking of notes that would have been. I read somewhere that if you save every string you've ever used and bury them under the stage you'd most like to play at you'll make it there. You'll stand on the stage you were once a

spectator to. I drop all my dead strings into a box marked Tokyo Dome, hoping I might be able to play in the place legends are made, the place where *L'Arc~en~Ciel*, after drummer Sakura—arrested for heroin, arrested for being arrested—made its comeback.

I oil up the last spot, push the E string in, then push the peg back into place. I give it a gentle pull, careful not to snap it, and work my way back to the head. Slipping it through the pegs is some kind of art, like rope-tying for fishermen, like a transmutation involving sound. It took me a long time to get it right the first time after I got it wrong, but if music has taught me anything, then it's taught me that I'm patient.

I snap another string and in the same way that you stare at a test paper for minutes after minutes and only, in the final moments, right before it's too late, remember the answer, I solve my AX problem.

Percy.

CHAPTER THREE

After Japan lost World War II, the US outlawed samurai manga. The idea was that samurai were symbols of patriotism—loyalty, like the kind the kamikaze fighters had during the war, the kind that drove a man to drive a plane straight into enemy territory, to bomb Pearl Harbor. Patriotism was dangerous. They got rid of it. Sports manga were outlawed, too. No karate or judo or anything like it. Sports are another kind of patriotism: blood loyalty to your teammates.

I'm not saying that banning samurai or sports was a good idea, and I'm not saying that it wasn't, not when it worked for both sides—because Japan, Japan couldn't take another A-bomb, and Americans will do anything when they're afraid—but at least it was a plan. At least there was a course of action.

And that's more than I can say for my city.

Birmingham, AL, is known for one (and only one thing): the Civil Rights Movement. And, while it's cool to be known as the place that changed history, a place that, in many ways, allows for our first fist-bumping president, the reason the movement took place here is because this is where hatred lives, comfortably reclined on the slack-baked ribbons of its foldout chair, watching the smog settle over the dry, black streets of Birmingham.

Now, I take it back when I say that this is the only thing Birmingham is known for. I mean, we have Bo Bice, Taylor Hicks, and Ruben Studdard. And no one will argue that we aren't known for our Southern hospitality, because I swear to Haruhi that we are some of the politest people you will ever encounter. We will hold the doors open for a line of strangers. We will have twenty minute discussions with a sales clerk, the girl we now know by name, who, when we

return to her shop in two weeks—in two weeks—will remember us, our conversation, our original inability to find our debit card. But politeness doesn't always equal niceness. I guess in some ways we're more or less like Light Yagami* from *Death Note*, doing whatever it takes to reach our end goal, taking care not to attract negative attention to ourselves. We are trying, as best we can, to live without the red light that, fifty years ago, shone the blue eye of the nation on us.

“You can't just say you'll write a memo to discuss the future of an entire hospital,” Mary Elizabeth says, clapping her hands on her red desktop after every beat. We're in government, my second class of the day and my favorite. Shanti, love of my life, girl of my dreams, is here. My classmates are all seated in a circle, facing their opposition, but I'm seated on a cloud, casting discreet glances at the best girl, the girl directly across from me. I pretend, every now and again, to gaze at the wall clock or the Alabama map or the framed Declaration of Independence poster. I pretend not to notice the way she sits with her legs twisted to one side, her feet crossed at the ankles. Even in jeans, I can tell she has the kind of legs that the Statue of Liberty is hiding under her robe. Peace-bearing legs. I shift in my seat.

“It's not self-sustaining and it's not a feasible investment,” the guy across from Mary Elizabeth says. I've had the same eight classes since September. It's a week shy of February, and I still don't know everyone's name.

“Okay. But what about necessity? What people need?” It's Miss Moretti. She's sitting in a seat exactly like ours and listening. She wraps her hands around her words. “Cooper Green is a vital part of the community.”

Shanti nods her head approvingly. Normally, she's one of our talkers. Today, suffering from a cold, she's bundled up in a scarf, listening to Mary Elizabeth's words, amending with

empathetic nods, soothing her foggy head with Mary Elizabeth's righteousness.

"Yeah, but it's not self-sustaining. It's county-owned and, let's face it, the county is floundering." It's the same guy. He always uses words like that. Floundering. I think he aims to be a congressman.

"But if you take away inpatient care you're leaving thousands of poor people vulnerable." Mary Elizabeth seems adamant. Her back's straight enough to correct the curve of the chair. "That doesn't sit well with me. It's not right."

"It's not Christian," someone else says.

There are mumbles of yeses, head nods, faith restored. The mystery speaker has brought in the smoking gun, something more powerful than compassion: religion.

Floundering Guy's not having it. "They said they'd check into things. They're already talking with St. Vincent's and UAB about providing inpatient care."

"At a price these people can't afford," Mary Elizabeth says.

Shanti is on the edge of her seat. She's in love with Mary Elizabeth today.

"It comes down to people," Ms. Moretti says. "You have to trust the officials you elect to make the decisions that best represent the interest of the community that elected them. There are five members on Jefferson County's commission. Each member is in charge of one of five specific divisions. Community Development, Roads and Transportation, Finance and General Services, Environmental Services, Technology and Land Development, and lastly, Health and Human Services." Ms. Moretti is up now, writing these five categories on the blackboard.

"I want you all to dig. Find out about each of our commissioners—the platform they ran on, how long they've served on the commission, and which division they specialize in. Bring in what you find for next class."

A girl raises her hand and speaks. “Ms. Moretti?”

“Yes?”

“I know you say we elected these people, but it wasn’t really us, was it? I mean, not everyone’s originally from Jefferson.” She clears her throat. “And we didn’t vote for them. Therefore, the decisions being made here really had nothing to do with us.”

Ms. Moretti glances around the room at each of us. When she stops at me, I make the mistake of peeking back, only for a moment.

“Lincoln,” Ms. Moretti says, “What do you think? About all of this?”

The class shifts in their chairs and notices me, an easy target, because the only person close to my level of darkness—Naveed, an Indian kid from Five Points—is absent. My Shanti, light as sand—high-yella, my Madear would call it—comes nowhere near, though her eyes—two hazel oases—are the only ones I can see.

Two hundred and ten people stand to lose their jobs if the city switches Cooper Green to outpatient care only. It’s all my mother can talk about, even though she’s a nurse at UAB Hospital, Birmingham’s biggest employer and a shining jewel in Alabama. Two hundred and ten people. When the court houses closed, seven hundred people lost their jobs. I want to remind the girl of this. I want to tell her this and much more than this, about the lives of the employees and the people who really need this hospital. But participating means speaking, and speaking means drawing attention to myself, and that’s the last thing I want. My throat closes, there’s a persistent itch under both armpits, an inner itch in both ears. My breathing picks up, and I regulate it like I’ve taught myself: breathe in only whole notes, Lincoln. Make a steady beat.

In *En*, Kenny and Kenji communicate through letters. Things began rocky—Kenny couldn’t believe what he was reading the first time he came across Kenji’s letter and if this had

been any other day he would have thrown the bottle into the sea. But Kenny's family was poor, just like Kenji's. They'd moved from Mississippi to San Francisco so that his father could help build ships during the war. He hadn't made many friends since they'd left and he was lonely. Hunger was something he could handle, but hunger and loneliness was something else.

I open my mouth to stop Miss Moretti from speaking. She looks worried. Mother kind of worried, with her lips partly open and her hand raised as if she's about to touch my shoulder. Kenji's mother looks just as worried. She holds her son by the shoulder and checks him daily for ails—for signs that the explosion has done something to him. She's already lost two children during the war; she won't lose another. She holds her boy tight and squeezes. I wonder if she can see it or feel it, that anxiousness that I wear like a jacket. Ms. Moretti's hand hovers near my shoulder, but then the bell rings, and I'm free to go.

*

Second period is over, and I make it a point to slide out of the door before Ms. Moretti can readdress me. Once I'm out of the classroom, blood redistributes to the appropriate parts of my body. Breathing gets a little easier. I watch the floor, hoping nobody from class notices me. Next up is French II, and after the draining discussion we had in government, I'm happy to be going somewhere where debates aren't an option because would-be debaters trip over words.

“Lincoln?”

My heart touches my toes, bounces up and settles in my groin. I stop walking.

Shanti comes over to me, Mary Elizabeth beside her. Shanti smiles at me but keeps her distance, a tissue held in her hand like a softball. “You got cut off.”

Her nose is red, irritated, and her eyes are liquid with tears. I can hear the congestion in her voice, a wheezing, rasping sound.

I try not to forget words. “Yeah?” I was never able to talk to girls I like, not like Percy, who’s had the same girlfriend for a year and even Byron, who’s got little crushes lining up the block for him.

“I’m curious to know what you were going to say. You don’t talk much.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” I don’t know where to put my hands. I have a tendency to drum my fingers on my pants leg when I’m nervous. Four beats, a whole note, one beat, a quarter. I hold onto my French book. Why would Shanti ever like me? I feel bony and weak in her presence. My dark skin appears darker. I hide my hands. There’s nothing she could see in me.

“Ashanti, we have to go,” Mary Elizabeth says. She’s got one freckled hand on Shanti’s shoulder, another up in the air waving at someone. “Coach will kill us if we’re late.”

“Bye, Lincoln,” Shanti says. She smiles again, her lips chapped with cold, and follows behind Mary Elizabeth.

Shanti knows that I like her. I admitted as much—with Shanti standing close by, well in hearing range— because I couldn’t deny liking her when harassed by a classmate. This was in October. Since then, Shanti hasn’t said anything and neither have I.

But in my head, I say all the things I wanted to say to her. *Marry me. Two hundred and ten people. Compassion. I love you.* In my head, I know the words that woo, the words that would win her. I know the right song to play to save a city from itself. I know how to be the kind of person who believes in what he says.

But outside myself, outside my thoughts, I’m speechless. I’m more mute than I know is possible. I shake off the feeling of wanting, hold onto my notebook, and head off to French II, where it’s okay to let the wrong words tumble out. Where my declarations of hope are simply mistakes. I didn’t mean to say *love* but some other, less powerful word. My apprenticeship with

the language is my savior. I'm free to make all the mistakes that humans make.

*

When French II is over, I have lunch with Mitchell, not because I want to, but because Maes and Avery don't share our lunch period and because Chris, my normal lunch cohort, is absent today, and I'm not sad and pathetic enough that I eat lunch by myself.

Eating with Mitchell is like dining with Vegeta* from *Dragon Ball Z*. Mitchell's got the appetite of a Saiyan* and the Southern etiquette of a New Jerseyite. You can't talk to this guy, not while he's eating. He won't acknowledge you beyond a few grunts and "yeses" and "hell, noes" and "pass me a napkin." He eats with the ferocity of someone who wants to keep on living. He eats like someone who knows what it's like to have gone to bed hungry.

Mostly I leave him be, push the few flecks of corn around on my lunch tray and canvass the cafeteria with my eyes. We're cut up into sections so thick you could stick a flag in us, build a constitution, and declare separate states: gamers, geeks, and what used to be called Goths. Hipsters sit outside on the hill, breathing in winter colds.

Mitchell goes for his second pizza. Pizza, corn, and Tatter Tots. The same exact meal he ate the first day I met him.

I came here as a sophomore. Before that I went to a Birmingham City School where I had some trouble, mostly that I was miserable and this made Mom miserable, and that, in a botched attempt to escape some of that misery, I incorrectly built my first and last bong and smoked some really bad grey ash that made the second floor of Casa de Brown smell like a combination of dirty underwear and one-man sex. I also went bat-shit crazy, my heart played "Ride on a Shooting Star" on my ribcage, my eyes opened so wide I saw into my grandmother's past, and I broke out into a cold sweat so intense my carpet still has water stains. By the times my parents

got to me I was gone enough that I lay balled up on my bedroom floor with my hands over my ears, heaving, trying to decide if God exists or if we're all doomed to one day—

Vulcan has a mixed population, which in Alabama means most of the students are white, but there's a significant "Other" population, mostly Asian, black, or somewhere from the Middle East, eighty/twenty. The school I went to in Birmingham was less diverse; the school was mostly black, meaning that there were eight hundred and ninety-seven black kids, seven white kids, and sixty Hispanics.

The Birmingham school wasn't bad; in fact, it was one of the better schools in Birmingham. Problem is, better in Birmingham still equates to near shit on an educational level, and there weren't a whole lot of anime fans in the school, at least not a lot of people willing to admit it. Not everybody's going to be cool with your knowledge of production companies and OSTs, original anime soundtracks. Understandable. But after the grey ash episode, Mom got worried that I was getting depressed. That as a result of that depression I was spending way too much time in my room. That I wasn't meeting enough people. And since most Southerners don't believe in therapy, in the tenth grade, for fifteen hundred dollars and a piece of paper that said "reason for transfer: school desegregation"—I changed to Vulcan, where I thought the dork population might be more in my favor. That was more than a year ago.

Problem is, everybody's *The Walking Dead* or *Hunger Games* or Marvel Comics, and Vulcan's no different. All of those series are fine. I mean, I can speak to each of them. But where was the Japanese love? Where was my fellow *Death Note* fan? My Japanimation domination buddy?

He was sitting his fat ass down on one of the blue spinning lunchroom stools snacking on three pieces of generic, square cafeteria pizza, a half cup of corn, and a half-ton of tatter tots.

And he was sitting alone. And he had an SOS* dog tag—“Spreading Excitement all Over the World with Haruhi Suzumiya Brigade” dog tag— hanging from his backpack, shimmering like a monochrome-colored beckon in the sky. I decided to make friends, which means I decided to use every ounce of just-do-it I had in reserve.

The big dude squinted at me, cheese-grease fastened to his fat fingers like baby oil.
Mitchell Harris.

“You’re in my fucking light,” he said.

First time I see him and he tells me that I’m in his light. It’s artificial light. I’m in everybody’s fucking light.

“Sorry?” I was passive-aggressive in that first meeting with him. I regret it now.

“You’re in my light. You *lose* something?”

What the hell could I have lost? “No.”

“Then what?”

I really wanted to punch him in the face. Problem is I was a coward, a very lonely coward. “Saw your chain. Haruhi Suzumiya, right?”

His swamp-hazel eyes glossed over with a flash of light, which should have been impossible, seeing as how I was blocking his artificial light. “You watch *Melancholy*?”

“Yeah.” *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* is notable for two things: its plot, where a high school girl establishes a club for ESPers, time travelers, and aliens, and its format, where the original episodes aired out of order in Japan and the first aired episode was episode eleven.

Mitchell grabbed a napkin that was already deteriorating from grease stains and rubbed it methodically, like he was trying to coax a genie out of it. “Uh huh. I like Yuki.”

I sat down, and he stank-eyed me like I had slapped his mother on the ass. “The episode

where Haruhi's singing with—”

“I know the episode. But I'm kind of into Yuki.”

“A meganekko fan,” I said, meganekko meaning girls who wear glasses.

“The glasses. And the monotone.” For a second, Mitchell almost seemed to smile, and for a second, I almost believed we could be friends.

But if I'm being honest about it, Mitchell Harris and I can never be friends, not really. It's a chore for either of us to be in the same room with each other, let alone talk about anything but the thing that got us talking in the first place: anime. And I guess me not liking Mitchell and Mitchell not liking me has a lot to do with fear.

When I was eight, Byron's age now, I remember going to the Wal-Mart in Roebuck and trying to win a stuffed animal out of one of the crane machines. I was awful at it, but I kept trying while Mom and Dad stayed inside, paying for groceries, and Percy, who was supposed to be watching me, went to grab a Coke out of a vending machine. An old white guy came over to the crane machine and watched. He was nothing less than jovial when he told me, “You have to go to the left.”

I listened. I went to the left and pressed the release. I picked up the edge of a dinosaur's foot—a tyrannosaurus—but the dinosaur fell.

The old man shook his head. “Not bad. You'll get it. I saw a colored boy come in here the other day and win three of these.”

The old man patted the machine. He put down two quarters for me and headed over to the baskets.

Maybe that doesn't seem like a big deal, but it was for me. At eight, you internalize it. At seventeen, you accept that it's the way the world works. The guy was greeting one hundred.

When he was my age Hitler wasn't even relevant, so I know I shouldn't take what he said personally. But when I talk to Mitchell, to some extent, I remember this incident and every incident like it. I remember that just as that crane game was a unifier for me and the old guy, anime does the same thing for Mitchell and me. I remember that you can cut down a tree just by hewing away at it, same as you can by sawing it in half the time. It doesn't take much—one old guy calling you colored, one sales clerk following you in the store, one car full of people yelling *darkie* out the window—to cut you down. Cullman, where Mitchell's from, is about as white as cottage cheese. Mitchell's been known to *the* everything—as in *the* gays and *the* blacks and *the* Jews—and this worries the hell out of me. If I ever told Mitchell the crane story, he wouldn't understand it. He wouldn't see what's bad about this one, small incident.

And that's what scares me.

“Lincoln? You figure out how you're going to AX yet?” Because Mitchell's not eating anymore, he's free to talk. I can tell he's been trying to get my attention for a while now, because he's resorted to calling me by my first name.

I don't respond.

“Brown.”

“How's your ear?” I point to the ear Avery bit.

He kicks the table. Quickly, he calms himself. “Go to hell.”

I stand and pick up my tray. “Did she use her teeth? Are they pointy?” I've barely eaten anything. My stomach's still jacked from government.

He walks and I follow, right beside him. “Does this count as second?”

I keep this up until I think he's going to smack me with his lunch tray. When he can take no more—when his ears are that patchy, vibrant, kind of red—I lay off. We go our separate ways,

no goodbyes between us, and head off to fourth period.

*

I lead the way down 459, past Derby Parkway and Alton, until 459 becomes 59 on Gadsden Highway, with Maes and Avery following in Maes's car, and Mitchell following in his truck. It's all a multilane highway that I don't particularly like driving on during this time of day, because at some point I-20, I-459, 59 become more inbred than those kids from *Angel Sanctuary*. At any rate, I merge to the right, and we all manage to exit at the Roebuck exit without anyone getting lost or ticketed, a feat because Maes, Avery, and Mitchell have only driven here twice.

Roebuck is the moose track ice cream of ethnicities, black and white with some brown thrown in between. I drive a little ways, through the stop light that comes before the McDonald's and the Shell gas station, past the still fairly new-feeling CVS, past the even newer Walgreens—built on top of the old Chuck E. Cheese's—nearly opposite the Exxon that, until recently, still had attendants who would pump gas for you, but now serves as a semi-deserted gas station where people hock everything from stuffed Tweety birds to African safari paintings to zebra rugs. I lead us up a small hill, overlooking a Chic-Fil-A and Mobil, and park us on the hairdresser's side of the parking lot, a bit behind the empty O'Charley's, the first of the last of Roebuck's closed restaurants. Maes and Mitchell pull up beside me, Maes in her red Fusion and Mitchell in his dusty white Ford pickup, and from our place on the hill we can see the slow decaying of a neighborhood.

This is our second time hunting for prostitutes since, in a moment of fogginess, I mistakenly told everyone that the massage spa beside Cousin Bee's hairdresser was *that* kind of massage spa beside the Cousin Bee's hairdresser.

Reactions varied. Mitchell told me my cousin had seen wrong. Avery asked me if the

prostitutes were pretty. And Maes gave me a stare I could feel. The kind of once-over your little brother gives you when you miss his first basketball game of the season. Something you feel in the left of your chest and down to your toes.

We jump out and huddle inside the bed of Mitchell's pickup, the best location to spy from. We stay close as kin, trying to steal some warmth.

We watch the white building in front of us, *Yomiko's* branded below the roof, burning hooker red. The windows are blacked out and the doors are shut tight.

I glance around. I'm already thinking that this is a bad idea. Parked on the spa's side, under the cover of trees, are three cars: a red Chevy pickup with a 95.7 JAMZ sticker on it, a bright yellow Mustang, and a green Sienna minivan, complete with one of those stick figure family decals—mom, dad, daughter, daughter, son, and dog. I shake my head.

"I don't know what's worse," I say to everyone. "The yellow Mustang, bright as it is, or the poor sucker driving the minivan. Soccer dad has some balls."

"Maybe it's Soccer mom?" Avery asks.

"This spa doesn't exactly cater to that clientele," I tell her. Maes doesn't glare at me for saying balls. This is how I know she's deep in thought. This is how I know this is a bad idea.

I don't actually want to be here again. I only told them about the place in passing, on a whim, on a day when Mitchell was getting too big for his britches to stomach and going on about how much work he has to do as a senior. I don't like seeing Mitchell as a center. Avery, Maes, they're fine. But not Mitchell. The spa was the first thing I remembered. I guess I should be grateful. The longer we stay here, the longer I don't have to answer questions about AX. But the longer we stay here, the more likely we are to actually see the women and the clients and the more likely things are to go wrong.

We wait. We duck down every time the door to the hairdresser opens, then raise tentative heads when a car drives off. Eventually, twenty minutes into our unplanned stakeout, we hunger, and Mitchell and I run over to the gas station across the street and pick up a bag of Sun Chips, a bag of Skittles, and enough Buffalo Rock and Sunkist for all of us to share.

There's the popping of soda cans, the single sigh a bag of chip releases, and the jangling of Skittles from bag to palm. I don't have much of an appetite, not when I consider the face Maes is making—full of concentration—but I eat a few of Maes' Skittles, anyway. I don't want to be here. I don't want trouble. I don't want to end up on the evening news—"Local Kids Bag Prostitutes" or worse, "Local Kids Buy Prostitutes"—I want to go home.

"See, Mitcchan," Avery says. "I told you you'd like the Sun Chips." She rolls up the sleeves of her oversized North Face jacket and digs into the bag of chips.

Mitchell snatches his hand out of the bag. "They're all right." He wipes his fingers on his Tide sweatshirt and leans up against the back of the pickup, his girth in need of room. He wiggles around a bit, trying to get comfortable, while Maes hogs the Skittles.

Avery slides around in the truck bed and snuggles beside Maes. Maes, for her part, tucks back a strand of Avery's hair and offers her a Skittle without saying a word. Mitchell stares over their heads.

The door to the spa opens, and the four of us crouch near the edge of the truck bed. Mitchell, in a moment of clarity or confusion, pulls a paint-covered tarp over us, leaving enough room for us to see, and we watch a very small Asian woman open the door and let out a customer.

This guy, this customer, seems like the kind of man who'd let you skip him in the grocery checkout lane. Plain features—white, brown hair, ironed jeans, ironed shirt. Completely and

utterly ordinary.

He strolls on out like he's walking on motherfucking sunshine. It's fifty degrees outside, and this guy has more pep in his step than the giant peanut on a box of Planter's. He hops into, of all things, the Mustang, and speeds off.

We wait a good three minutes in silence before Mitchell pulls back the tarp and we all come up for air.

There's a scene in *Full Metal Alchemist: Brotherhood* where Ed discovers the ingredients for creating a philosopher's stone, that all-powerful, life-creating, life-affirming stone. His face goes from disgust—thinking of how you got here—to fear—thinking of how you'll leave—to rage—not knowing what's next. That's the face Maes makes right now.

When she says Wal-Mart, we don't ask if she wants to go. Mitchell just gets us there.

Maes goes in, alone. Mitchell, Avery, and I are all completely silent, a little afraid, I think, for Maes's mental well-being, though nobody says it.

I watch for signs of her, but all I see are the usual suspects: a stray dog strutting near the entrance; a black girl wearing neon-green colored leggings and a shirt so tight that I can make out the individual rolls of each of her stomachs, shopping with some dread-headed, pants-sagging dude in a wife-beater; a Hispanic woman and her two kids, a boy who nearly runs out into the street, and a wavy-haired little girl who sticks close; and one of the stubborn, old white ladies who refuse to give up their hold on the neighborhood. Where have-a-full-conversation-in-the-middle-of-the-street and can-I-have-a-dollar-to-catch-the-bus men are, I have no idea.

I spot Maes—the only Asian thing that isn't in the food or nail section of Wal-Mart or selling herself at *Yomiko's*—and Mitchell instinctively turns the car key. This isn't necessary; the motor's been running.

When Maes climbs in, we drive to the spa and park, like we did before. I understand that this is bad. This is really bad and this is all my fault. I brought a fem-bot to watch prostitutes and there can be no happy outcome. Nothing good has ever come from Wal-Mart, and I have a feeling that whatever Maes bought is meant for destruction.

Maes jumps out of the truck, bag in hand, and the rest of us follow. She marches straight on over to the front of the minivan, the only car that's left, and wedges herself between a tree and the front of the car. She opens up her bag and pulls out a pair of pink and purple thongs, size walrus.

"Maes," I say real slowly, "What are you going to do?"

She kneels down in front of the car and weaves the ends of the thongs through the grille. She secures the thongs with a bow.

"Don't you think this is a little much?" I ask. I peek at the piece of paper she's taped to the crotch. I want to ask what it says. I want to snatch it away.

"He's married with three stick figure children," she says. "I think this is too little."

"We need to go," Mitchell says. Collectively, he drags both big arms behind our backs and pushes us all forward. "Now. Before we're caught."

"Avery thinks he's an asswipe," Avery says as she steps toward the car. "Maes did the right thing."

Maes doesn't respond. She marches forward, and for a moment, she doesn't remind me of Ed, the boy who wanted the philosopher's stone, or Maes, her namesake, but of Major General Olivia Armstrong, fearless military leader of Fort Briggs.

"Mitchell," I say, and God must things be going downhill if I have to talk to Mitchell, "Does this seem like a good idea to you?"

He shrugs. “Don’t care one way or the other. I didn’t do anything.”

And that’s it, isn’t it? We didn’t do anything. Not Avery, not Mitchell, not me. I glance back at the van. The part of me that likes the idea of dispensing justice to a honky tonk man that, by all accounts, doesn’t seem to appreciate the wife and kids, is being opposed by the part of me that kind of wants to know the particular circumstances of this man’s life. Maybe he’s divorced. Maybe this is a friend’s van. Maybe his wife beats him.

I wouldn’t mind playing the hero, but I have to confirm the villain first. This man, whatever his story, I think we at least owe it to him to hear it. But if I say anything, Maes will be furious. As much as she likes what we do—anime, manga, music—and as much as she tries to ignore some of the more questionable things in anime—what she calls “misogyny in *Death Note*”—she is still the kind of person who wouldn’t think twice about watching a harem anime, which makes questionable this whole thing about being somehow wounded.

But who am I to say anything? Through all my uneasiness, I still watch *G Gundam*, cringing at Mexico’s Tequila Gundam, and I still refuse to think too hard about Mr. Popo, dark as Hitchcock, drawn like something left over from a minstrel show. We’re both hypocrites. Only, I haven’t ruined anyone’s life yet.

But it’s a little late for third guessing. We’re already piling into cars and heading our separate ways. We’ve already decided to stand by Maes’s anger. For better or worse, we’ve branded that car.

*

I’m not sure what’s happening with Maes, but I know it’s not good. She didn’t respond to the message I sent her last night, and when I checked my phone this morning she was still a no

show. I don't understand it. I really don't. But I figure I should tread cautiously. Maes isn't the type to blow up, and that's what makes her anger so unpredictable.

I don't bother talking to her in pre-calculus. I arrive right in time and leave right when the bell rings.

Getting past Avery isn't that easy.

"Did you talk to Maes?" Avery sits on my desk before American History begins. The people around us give us funny looks, but Avery, a center, doesn't pay them any attention. "I don't think what she did was wrong." She twiddles her feet.

"It's not that it was wrong, and it's not that it was right." I try to ignore her. I flip through my history book, dread that we're moving closer and closer to the sixties.

"But isn't there only wrong and right?"

"I don't know," I say. What I want to say is no, there isn't. I want to say that I'm beginning to think that things aren't always colorblind.

She huffs at me and slams her fists on my desk repeatedly, freaking out the people around us. "Link-kun, Link-kun, Link-kun! This is driving Avery crazy." She falls back on my desk, her short legs and short arms hanging over the sides. Gravity tries very hard to force her boobs from her North Face jacket.

Every guy around me has inched closer.

"We'll work it out," I say to her. "Get up. Come on. We always do." I flip all the way to Vietnam, then glance at her.

She springs into an upright position. Gravity loses. "That guy was a creeper."

"Then we should go around exposing the creeps of the world?" I lean against my hand. I think about it. "You've never had consequences, have you?" I think about it some more. Mom

would say that Avery's rich, white, and young and has probably never even considered consequences, not even once. Things probably fall into place for her.

All movement stops. "Consequences," she says as she slips off my desk, "would mean that somebody cares. Nobody cares."

It's Avery who ignores me now. Before I can respond, she sits at her desk, flips open her Lisa Frank notebook, the one she sticks my papers with, and sketches.

And because I don't have the words, I turn front and center and wait for Miss Dubois to speak.

*

I don't go to the art room at all today. The truth is I have two hours of work at The Guitar Shop and then two to three hours of babysitting at Bible Study. The greater truth is I don't want to have to be weird around Maes.

I stare at the wall of guitars that hang across from my cash register. Blue, green, red, it's a Technicolor rainbow of excellence coloring my daydreams of wild nights and music. Typically, when I imagine music, I imagine myself on stage, my lead singer, my Maes, up there with me. In today's daydream, I've x-ed out Maes's face so that I don't have to think too hard about it. Instead, I let her voice speak for itself. She's singing Aya Hirano's "God Knows," and I'm with her word for word on the guitar. Together, we are making art. Together, we're showing the world what dreams sound like.

When my short stint at The Guitar Shop is over, I head down Edwards Lake Road toward Roebuck. It's a short drive, fifteen minutes tops. I ride past the new Huffman High School, located where the old Wal-Mart Supercenter used to be, now across the street from an Aldi, a Goodwill, a beauty supply chain, and a liquor store. I turn the curve around the complex, past a

generic gas station and a Church's pumping out so much chicken I can smell the oil from my car. I don't stop driving until I pull into the parking lot of Walking on Water for the Eyes That Can Not See Baptist Church in the Roebuck-Center Point area. This is not my church, but my Aunt Retta's church. My church, a tiny, quiet brick and white-roofed place named, discreetly, First Baptist, doesn't need me to watch the kids for them. Besides, working at Aunt Retta's church gives me a chance to see Cousin Bee, and Cousin Bee's usually good for advice.

WOW Church is huge, built on a lot that could have easily housed a Wal-Mart Supercenter and a McDonald's. It's all brick, no white roof in sight, and the parking lot is always full no matter what time of day or night or dawn it is. I take a pilgrimage across the concrete, enter, and approach the front desk where Mrs. Jackson is sitting, thumbing through a pocket-sized version of the Bible. When she sees me, she grins.

"Lincoln!" she shouts. She always shouts when she sees me, like she can't believe I've actually shown up.

I smile politely. "Hi, Mrs. Jackson."

"You here for Bible Study Sitting?"

"Yes ma'am." Bible Study Sitting is the only reason I ever come.

She blinks at me, and I know at this point I should say something, ask about how Mr. Jackson is doing, whether his gout has cleared up and if he's still got the sugar in his legs. I could ask about her granddaughter, a light-skinned, big-boned basketball player from Huffman, a girl I used to go to elementary school with and who, I'm told, used to have a crush on me. But that was elementary school and this is high school and there's no way six-foot-fix Ayesha would even notice me now.

I know I'm supposed to say something, but I don't, because the only thing more awkward

than standing and talking to my peers is standing in a church and talking to one of the congregation. I don't know what I'm afraid of. That she'll question me--"You been reading the Bible? The Lord helps those who help themselves." or "How's school? You still on the honor roll? Lord, I can't tell you how proud it makes me to see my children excelling." or "You got a girlfriend yet? Cute as can be."

"I'll head on to the back now."

Mrs. Jackson's smile wavers a bit—a bit. Like a quiver. But still, I don't stay. I tell her bye, then quickly turn left and head down one of the hallways, cloaked in blood-of-Jesus red carpet. I turn down another hallway and stop in front of a door. I take a moment to breathe—in, out, in again, the smell of stale air—then open the door and slip inside.

There must be twenty kids in the childcare center that doubles as a playroom after hours. Little kids—can't be more than two—and bigger kids—can't be more than ten—running all over the place, sliding down one of the plastic, indoor slides, sitting in front of the television watching *Spongebob* like Byron does at home, sitting at the arts and crafts table eating Cheerios. I scan the room until I find Cousin Bee, seated in a child's blue plastic chair, eating from a huge bag of Peanut M&Ms, watching two boys play with their Nintendo DS systems. I shut the door and go over to her.

Cousin Bee's eighteen. She's a color closer to Percy, new penny brown, but about as skinny as me. She's wearing her Ramsay High School hoodie—hoodie on—to block out some of the cold. When she finally sees me, she pats a red chair beside her. I sit down.

"Hey," she says. She scratches the back of her left ankle with her right foot. She's still wearing her school uniform—khaki pants, white shoes.

"Hey," I say. I observe the chaos around her. "Having fun?" Kids are about the only

humans I can handle on a regular basis. They don't bother people. They don't ask too much of me—a little attention, a few questions.

"Always do." She bites down on a yellow M&M.

A little girl walks to Bee and holds up a black Barbie doll. Bee takes the doll. She chews on another M&M and scrutinizes. The doll's wearing the yellow dress from *Beauty and the Beast*. Her hair is long and smooth. The girl fidgets where she stands, wringing the bottom of her pink shirt.

"I like the dress you picked," Bee says, "but that hair needs work. Try braids." She hands the doll back to the little girl, who blinks like she doesn't quite understand what's happened, probably because she's maybe two-years-old.

Bee doesn't seem to care. She turns to me, in her little plastic seat. "I hear you have a problem, Cous."

The little girl waddles away, back over to an area with other little boys and girls about her age. She plops down on the mat and touches Barbie's hair.

"It's already gotten to you, huh?" I slide into my chair and stretch out my legs.

"I can't believe you're still into anime."

"You used to watch *Sailor Moon* online."

"I was young then," she's quick to say. "And *Sailor Moon* is different."

"It's exactly the same."

"How much money you need?" she asks.

A kid, a boy this time, walks over. He's holding a Nintendo DS. "Who needs money?" He's at least eight and sporting a high-top fade. I'm impressed that he can pull it off.

"You gonna give me some?" I eye his hands.

"No." He hides the DS behind his back.

Bee pours two M&Ms into her palm and holds them out. The kid takes them.

"Don't tell the others I gave you candy."

"Okay." The kid wanders off, sucking on the candy, as if nobody's going to hear that.

"How much?"

"Around a thousand." I think she'll make fun of me if I tell her the exact number. Bee's always making fun of me for stuff like that. She says I'm too serious, too uptight. But I can't help it. I'm goal-oriented. I don't like grasping at imaginary numbers, I like real, factual digits. If that means that I can tell you exactly how much it costs to go to AX and exactly how many episodes there are in *Dragon Ball Z*—two hundred and ninety one--and the exact number of times Krillin* dies—five times if we're talking alternate timeline, six if we include old age—then whatever, fine.

"Jesus."

It seems a little sacrilegious to say the Lord's name in vain in the Lord's house, but I don't say anything. "And all twelve apostles."

"And Judas too."

"And Judas," I relent.

"How much you have saved?"

"Not a lot."

"Mm." She scrunches her lips to one side, basically makes a duck face. She pulls back her hood and scratches beneath the rubber band of her ponytail. "I think," she says, "you're not gonna make it at this rate."

Et tu, Judas? "Thank you. That's exactly what I wanted to hear from you today."

“I’m sorry, but you don’t have one thousand dollars.”

“I’ve had it before. That guitar wasn’t given to me.” What I don’t say is that money is a secondary problem. I can earn the money. I might lose a few nights of sleep and fail a few tests as a result of it, but I *will* earn the money. The problem is convincing Percy to go with me.

The problem is, he’s nice to me but I hate him, anyway.

“Then do it again.” She rests one arm on the back of her chair. “Though I don’t think Auntie’s gonna let you go.”

I sit up, lean forward, and place my head in my hands. Even Bee knows that my mom is not a force to be challenged. This is the woman who went through thirty-six hours of labor to have me, who once yanked a boy from under a fallen bookcase at the library, who takes her coffee straight. There’s no way on God’s browning Earth that she’s going to let me go anywhere near California without Brown supervision.

Percy is my only answer.

“You’re smart,” Bee says, “methodical. You’ll figure something out—*Terrence do not pull her hair.*” Bee stands and goes to reprimand one of the kids. She grabs a boy by the arm and gets in his face. She’s got a stern face—narrow and skinny—but we all know she’s sweet as taffy when it comes to kids, so I don’t worry. Methodical.

I’m methodical. Methodical. I do my best work when I have a plan. I’m like Light Yagami, in that way, only my plans usually don’t involve world domination. I glance over at Bee’s bag. I can see her laptop poking out. An idea sparks.

*

Percy is there when I make it home, and I know that despite the low energy of the group after The Great Panty Planting and the non-motivational speech Bee gave me, tonight’s the night

I have to make my move. I greet him and Mom and Dad and Byron the moment I enter the kitchen. Mom, still wearing her nurse's uniform, gives me a suspicious eye, but I ignore it and head up to my room.

When I come down ten minutes later with Lady, my laptop, I ask the family, even Byron, to sit down at the kitchen table.

"You didn't buy stocks, did you?" Dad asks. He rubs his eyes, trying to stay awake. It's only nine thirty, but I know he's ready for bed. He's pushing fifty-five.

"No." I sit Lady on the table.

"Have you eaten?" Mom asks. She's wearing her lounge clothes now, an old family reunion t-shirt and even older jogging pants.

"You didn't *lose* stocks, did you?" Percy asks. Even though I know he's already had dinner, he's eating a bag of Doritos.

"Yes. No," I say. Usually, I call Mom to ask her to fix me something. Today, I forgot. "Listen. I want to go to Anime Expo."

"I want to be a pirate! Argh!" Byron says. He slaps a hand over his left eye and waves an imaginary sword.

"You know, you're not actually needed at this meeting," I tell him, and this shuts him up.

"You can't go to Annie-may Expo without us and we can't afford to go," Mom says.

"I understand and appreciate that you don't want to send your seventeen-year-old son alone to California." I open up a slideshow on Lady.

"Thanks for appreciating," Dad says. He leans on the table, his right arm barely enough to support the weight of his drooping head.

"But what if another responsible adult went with me?" I have to be careful here. Mom

doesn't wear the pants in my family and neither does Dad. In fact, they share the same pair of pants, switching off, on, and off, day after night, week after month. On February first, you think that you're answering to Mom, following her whims, doing what she says, but then, when you've gotten into the rhythm, when you've started to understand who it is that holds the power in the family, March fifth sneaks up on you, punches you in the face, and you realize that Dad's got a hold of things, Dad's the go to, Dad's the king. And that's how it goes here, a never ending cycle, a back and forth, a stretched pair of Levi's.

On the laptop screen, I pull up a picture of the five of us, one taken by Aunt Retta at last year's Christmas dinner. We're cheesing hard enough to kill the lactose-intolerant. I click the right arrow, and the picture zooms to Mom, Dad, Percy, and me. I click once more, and it's Percy and me.

"Damn," Percy says. "Picked the wrong night to come over here."

Mom points to the screen and asks, "You want us to send Percy with you?"

"Bingo," I say. "Yes, Percy is a responsible adult."

Dad opens his mouth to say something, but before he can, I click the right arrow. On the screen, a picture of Percy's last high school report card.

"I know it's high school, but he doesn't show us his college grades. Even though they're A's and B's." I click the arrow. Screenshots of Percy's managerial awards appear on screen, compliments of Facebook.

"Could he be any greater?" I ask. "All these awards?"

Percy is silent. He has one hand covering his mouth and one hand on the back of the chair as if, at any second, he might push himself up and run.

I click. A picture of his apartment building materializes. "He even pays his own rent and

utilities while going to school. Is there a more responsible son, I ask you?”

“Me?” Byron asks.

“It’s not your day, Byron.”

“I’ll give you one thing,” Dad says. “Your PowerPoint skills are impressive.”

“Dad, you haven’t even seen what I do with a clip from *Everybody Hates Chris* and the theme song from *Rocky*.”

“Have you even asked Percy if he’ll do this for you?” Mom cuts in, standing behind Percy, but I can’t tell if she wants to block him from running or back him up.

“What kind of loving brother wouldn’t do this for me?”

“What makes you think,” Percy says, “I’d want to go to California with you?” He leans back in his chair and folds his arms over his shirt, new.

“You love me.”

“Since when?” He pulls his bottom lip into his upper, then covers both lips with both hands.

“You can’t ask your brother to spend his money on a trip with you,” Mom says. “Rent, utilities, car note, car insurance, groceries,” she says. She’s naming things with her fingers, striking a new digit with each bill. “Don’t be selfish.”

“How much does it cost?” Percy asks. He goes back to the Doritos bag, which I take to be a good sign.

Percy will need a plane ticket and a slightly bigger food budget, but not the cost of entry or cosplay. I can sneak into the hotel and sleep on the floor, which means there’s no reason to double the room charge. “Seven hundred and two dollars.”

Percy’s got every reason not to do this for me. He recently saw me flake out in a matter of

seconds. I never ask about his day or how he's doing. I avoid him when I can, my perfect, poised, brown-skinned brother.

He mouths out *fuck*.

"Please, Percival." I'm begging now and I know it, and it's pathetic. But what can I do? "If I don't go then no one goes. That's what we agreed on. I don't want to be that guy."

Percy rolls up the bag of Doritos. "I'd like to, you know I would, but I don't have that kind of money."

I drag my hands down my face. I can feel the blood running to my palms. I've let them down. I've let them all down.

"Why don't *you* pay for it?"

Dad's voice cuts through like Gabriel's. Mom frowns at him. She puts a hand on her skinny waist and blows air.

"You can do it, can't you?" Dad balances his chin on the bridge of his fingers and stares right at me.

I see the person this gangly body will grow into in his image, the me that I will be in twenty years. The watery eyes that will ask only enough of you, the tired stare that's already given too much of me. And yet, the spark of hope. "Earn enough for you and Percy. Then you can go. Maybe."

I glance at Mom.

"I'll work on her," Dad says.

Mom doesn't say anything. She squeezes each elbow and stands with her shoulders boxed. Byron slips into the great room.

I close the PowerPoint on Lady and pull up my AX spreadsheet. I do the addition. I

whisper. “One thousand, nine hundred and two dollars.” On the low end.

“You earn that amount by July,” Dad says, “and you can go. If Percy’ll go with you, that is.”

I stare at Percy. I have never wanted to love him more than in this moment.

He knows he’s already lost. “All right.” He leans forward in his chair and closes Lady. He’s too kind to tell me no.

My brother and I are eye to eye. It bothers me. His skin the color of one of Avery’s Copic markers, Caribe Cocoa, something to hold over my head. His eyes are dark and deep as my complexion. He is not the man I’ll be in eight years. But, right now, he is exactly the person I need.

He leans forward in his chair, his arms folded across the table. I sit there, as straight as I can manage, my knuckles pressed against the wood grain. No more weakness. No more blacking out or dizziness. In the silence that passes between brothers, we make a deal. If I can earn one thousand, nine-hundred and two dollars in four months, then I can go to AX.

CHAPTER FOUR

To obtain, something of equal value must be lost. That's what Alphonse Elric says in the beginning of *Full Metal Alchemist: Brotherhood*. It's alchemy's first law, the law of equivalent exchange. It's a law that says you can't create something out of nothing, a law that says giving is level with receiving. It's this law I think about when I push through the school's double doors. To go to California, I'll have to give as much as I get. I'll have to give my parents proof that I'm responsible. I'll have to give Percy the kindness that I haven't shown him in years.

But I'm willing to do that. As dumb as I am, I know there's more to going to AX than only going to AX. My mother is challenging me because I've challenged her authority and my father is challenging me to prove her wrong. And in some way, I'm challenging myself. Because now, if I don't earn the money, I've not only let the group down, I've proven that I'm incapable of pulling through in a pinch; I'll have let Mom win and Dad lose.

I spend all of first period in a state of near-numbness. Maes doesn't talk to me at all. Avery tries her best to force me to talk right before second period begins, but I'm not having it. Thoughts of Maes float around my head like dust bunnies; is she mad at me? I was the one who told her about the prostitutes. What began as a game—a distraction—has turned into a horror story. Will she forgive me? Even thoughts of AX, as pressing as they are, can't combat with thoughts of Maes.

Miss Dubois tells me to either get out or pay attention. Well, that's not right. What she really says, in her Miss Dubois voice, in her Miss Dubois way, is that "being here is optional." But what she really means is either get out or pay attention. I stop focusing on Maes and focus, embarrassingly, on Miss Dubois. I tremble. My legs quake. No one's watching me. No one's

watching me. *Breathe.*

Because life is hard and because I seem to have an especially bad case of The Unlucky, I hear, for the four hundredth time in my life, about The Civil Rights Movement.

I don't mean to say that I don't like American History or that I don't like learning about The Civil Rights Movement. But if you don't live in Birmingham, AL—that is, if you don't have the pleasure of going to 16th Street and seeing the church, walking by and seeing the museum, knowing that Bull Connor's Alabama is your Alabama—then you haven't learned about the movement. Then you haven't lived in its aftermath.

That, and I'm the only black kid in American History. I haven't felt this much a center of attention since we covered slavery last semester. Talking about anything racial is tough. Talking about anything racial in the state of Alabama is Super Saiyan IV* tough. None of us knows what to do. Do I sit super attentive, nodding my head and amening? Do the white kids around me appear apologetic—why should they? They weren't born in the forties, raised in the fifties, violent and bitter in the sixties, and for the most part, they're all about as nice as you'd expect twenty-first century kids to be, the only exception being the Mitchell-like dude, but he's your standard smartass, nothing to worry over. Still, days like this are bad days for me. I can feel my face heating up, sakura-blossom pink, though nobody can see it, dark as I am. I have that itch again, that groin, armpit, upper-lip itch, and I want to bolt. Eyes are on me—apologetic, curious, gauging my reaction. Everyone knows that this is awkward, would be less awkward minus the one black kid in the classroom. I stick my feet firmly to the ground. I can't tap out beats during class. *I cannot tap out beats during class.*

I try to focus in on one thing. First, Miss Dubois, but that doesn't work, because she keeps moving around and talking. Next, I try Migrant Mother, but the lines of her face appear

pitying, and I can't do it. Nothing outward is working. I feel a three-hundred-pound man sitting on the center of my chest. Nothing outward is working; I have to go inward. I have to retreat.

Go Igarashi wrote *B-san* when he was seventeen-years-old. By the time he was my age he'd lived through one world war, one bombing, one move from Japan to America. He came here. He came to Hawaii. I remember. I remember. He once said:

I was sick. I was hurt. For many years, I could not bring myself to live in Japan. How could I live in a country that had done this to itself? Yes, Americans dropped B-san, but Japan was dead long before that. We were dead the moment we resisted inward change.

Inward change. We were dead the moment we resisted inward change *keep breathing*.

Kelly Ingram Park was my playground as a kid. There are statues that capture moments in history—dogs snarling on leashes, jumping at your from either side, statues of MLK and children locked in jail cells. There's this one monument of a man—man might not be right; he's skinny and young-faced. No more than twenty—who's standing with his back arched, his jacket flying open, his hands out beside him like he's about to take flight. A police officer's got him by the jacket—the officer's tall and sturdy. You can almost imagine his badge number, his history—and he's holding a dog that's poised on his back legs, ready to maul the young-faced guy. I spent minutes staring at this statue as a child, minutes being hours in child-time. My Aunt Retta, a history teacher, took me and my cousin Bee—one year older than me, twenty years wiser in a lot of ways—and I was struck by how dumbstruck we both were. How we couldn't believe people could do this. How there was something in this world scarier than chanting Bloody Mary in the mirror at night. How these statues were now the playthings of children.

This year, Birmingham is celebrating fifty years forward. Fifty years since the beginning of The Civil Rights Movement. As if a period marks the end of a period.

In my city, we've tried to move on, first by covering it up, acting like it didn't happen: acting like decades of water hoses, backs of buses, debutants chanting *nigger* didn't happen. But this year, fifty years after separate but equal, after crosses burning, after four little girls—at 10:22 A.M. a bomb blasted in a Birmingham basement and four little girls died, but on the same day, across the pond, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones played their first and only concert together, the Great Pop Prom—we've decided to rip the bandage off. Let Alabama bleed. Let Birmingham, the festering wound that it is, be exposed to the wide-eyed wonder of the world once more. Why are we doing this? Why are we back here again, shoving the sins we'd been trying to hide up until yesterday, back into the spotlight, asking to be reexamined, reassessed?

Attack on Titan. It's a series about these giant humanoids that devour regular humans. The regular humans build a great wall around their city to keep the giants out. The wall gets breeched. The humans are devoured.

I heave. If anyone notices, they don't say anything.

We're tired. More tired than Ms. Parks. We're tired of being America's wound. We're tired of Dixie meaning dumb, racist, pigheaded. We're tired of being wrong.

I should be grateful. The banners going up, the white hands and the brown hands and the red hands coming together to rebuild the image of my town and my city and my state. But things don't change overnight; you can't rip the bandage off and expect *not* to see blood; words can be beautiful and only beautiful, while promises, beautiful as they sound, can go unchecked. I'll believe in a beautiful Birmingham when I see it. I'll believe it when the governor isn't tightening immigration laws like a noose and my friend Javier—the one kid I liked at my old school. The one—isn't telling me about how his Uncle and Aunt have gone into hiding, when a German business exec isn't being stopped at the side of the road for passport papers and arrested, when

Scott Beason doesn't call black folks aborigines, and when the Tiny Kingdom gets a little less tiny.

“Events have been planned throughout the city to commemorate the movement. As a bonus assignment, you will have the opportunity to attend one of these events,” Miss Dubois says.

Avery sits on the edge of her seat. Even though it's winter, she's kicked off her boots. She watches Miss Dubois, but her notebook page is filled with drawings.

What does Avery think as she listens? Does she think of me? Does she think of our proximity—touching distance—or does she think of nothing at all? Is she bothered? Is she guilty? Is she ready to move on? Can we be friends and are we friends now? And what would Mitchell think, Mitchell's who's got the same chip as me on his shoulder. And Maes? What about Maes? Sure, she's Korean, but does she feel anything from this? Is this how it's like for Koreans with Japan—the Japan that took over Korea, the Japan that refuses to apologize for wartime goodtime girls?

I listen to Miss Dubois same as I've listened to my mother and my father and my grandmother, who lived through it all. I'll keep listening, but with my headphones plugged in—one ear open, the other ear shut. I'll play to the beat of “Little Busters” by the pillows. I'll play on and on and on.

*

I go to the art room early after fourth-period psychology. I don't know what I'm going to say to Maes. What I do know is that I have to say something, even if the something comes out wrong and I end up making a fool of myself, stuttering like Tenchi*, nervous like a lover in a shoujo manga, gearing up for the first time. Maes isn't my lover but she is my vocal muse and in

some ways that makes disappointing her even scarier than if she was my lover. There used to be a time where I could imagine my music played with anyone, where the voice that accompanied my sound was a blurry noise, not a voice at all. Nowadays, it's only Maes's voice that'll do.

She doesn't disappoint. She arrives before Mitchell and Avery.

Because I'm nervous and because I don't know what to say, I salute her. Shoulders back, stomach in, hand to brow salute.

"Lieutenant Colonel Maes Hughes," I say, firm as I can. "Lincoln, here."

She slips her bag beside her feet, her long hair nearly touching her calves as she dips down. "At ease, Lincoln."

I lower my arm but not my guard.

"Later," Maes says.

"Later?"

"Later."

I don't know if I should be thankful or disappointed when Avery and Mitchell arrive.

"Maes!" Avery says as she bounces over to Maes and throws her arms around her, the hug between them a hug that should be reserved for people who haven't seen each other in months.

"I like your hair," Maes says. She tugs on Avery's two ponytails, both of which stick straight out and to the side of her head. She's purposely done them like Witch Hunter Robin's.

"I've got news," I say.

Mitchell pulls up a stool and sits at one of the art tables. "Better be good."

"Quiet, Mitcchan," Avery says. She pulls herself onto the table beside Mitchell. He scoots back.

“I don’t have cooties,” Avery says.

“You’re too rich for cooties,” Mitchell mutters.

“One is never too rich for imaginary germs,” Avery says. She takes her hands and adjusts imaginary glasses.

“I can go to AX,” I say, not bothering to wait until they’ve let the conversation run out.

“You shitting me, Brown?” Mitchell asks. “Because if you’re shitting me, you’re dead.”

“I would never do any kind of verb to you, Mitchell.”

“Link-kun can really go? Really, really?”

“Yeah.”

“Catch.” Maes doesn’t ask if there’s a catch, she tells me that there’s one.

I realize that I hate how right she always is. “Percy has to go with me.”

“Percy?” Avery asks. She tilts her head to the side.

“What the hell’s a Percy?” Mitchell asks.

I’ve never told them about my family in detail. We all know about Avery’s lineage. Her pedigree doesn’t just precede itself, it struts out and opens doors for everything that follows it. The only thing I know of Mitchell’s family is that his folks are divorced and his father owns a drug store. Maes’s family is a complete case-closed type mystery to me.

“Percival Brown,” I say, “is my beloved older brother.”

“Really beloved? Or Knives* from *Trigun* beloved?”

“To the best of my knowledge, he’s not a humanized weapon,” I say, “although, he has been known to slay a heart or two.”

“Corny,” Mitchell says. “Real corny.”

Avery makes a snap at Mitchell’s ear, and Mitchell nearly falls off his stool to avoid her.

I give Avery a thumbs-up. “See me after class. I’m buying you a Snickers.”

“Creepy,” Maes says. “Don’t take candy from strange men.”

“Link-kun’s not *that* strange.”

“All that aside, I can go to AX. I just have to earn enough to pay for both of us.”

All lighthearted gestures and jabs cease. Mitchell, Avery, and Maes all gaze at me, and a singular question suspends over their heads in an invisible thought balloon: *What did you say?*

“Here’s the thing.” I pace the floor, deliberately, to take my mind off the words I have to say. “My brother can’t afford the trip on his own. I have to pay for his share and mine.”

“But Link-kun, you’re poor.”

I hold my finger to my lips to silence her. *Middle-class*, I want to tell her. *A slight nudge up from poor.*

“I did the math, and I figure it’ll cost around seven hundred and two dollars extra.”

“How will you afford that?” Maes asks, which sounds a lot better than *you’re poor.*

“I’ll have to put in more hours at The Guitar Shop. More Bible Study.”

“You could probably use the Bible Study,” Mitchell mutters. He’s clearly frustrated with me, but that doesn’t stop me from retorting.

“Hey, did you read the verse about the dude named Mitchell who got eaten by the Cerberus for not knowing when to shut the hell up?”

“Focus.” Maes snaps her fingers at me and Mitchell. She waits for me to acknowledge her before she continues. “Can you do this or not?”

“I’m not going to lie to you; it’s going to be tight. But I can do it.” I stare from Maes to Avery to Mitchell. “We’re going to AX. I promise.”

Mitchell rolls his fat hazels and rests his fat head on one of his fat arms. Avery nods at

me, so full of belief that it's practically taken on wings and levitated her. Maes doesn't acknowledge me one way or the other. Instead, she walks to a cabinet that's wedged into a corner of the room and rummages.

She returns, holding a large, empty jar.

"Anyone got a sharpie?"

Avery jumps up at the chance to help. She leans over the table, grabs her bag, and digs until she finds a green sharpie. She throws it to Maes, who catches it with her free hand.

Maes sits the jar on the table beside Avery, and Mitchell and I scoot in closer to watch.

"Everybody goes or nobody goes," Maes says. Carefully, and with a hand as steady as the days, she draws thirteen horizontal dashes along the jar, one on top of the other, from vertical bottom to top. "We're a team."

"A team of what?" Mitchell asks.

"Otaku*," Maes answers, using the word for anime fans.

"Alabamians?" Avery asks.

"Fine," Mitchell says, then squints at the jar. "But I don't see how an old, cobwebbed jar is going to help us any."

"I think we need a counter," Maes says. "Every time we inch closer to our AX goal we should add money to this jar."

I see her calculating. One thousand, two hundred dollars and seventy-five cents times four, plus seven hundred and two dollars for Percy.

"Five thousand, five hundred and five dollars." She calculates again. "Six thousand, three hundred and five dollars with more cosplay money."

"Like hell I'm leaving my money in a pickle jar."

“Metaphorical money, Mitchell,” Maes says.

“Monopoly money,” I suggest.

“I guess it’s not the worst idea,” Mitchell says.

“Say it’s a good idea.”

“Avery has never, ever played Monopoly.”

“You poor child,” Maes says.

I feel bad enough for Avery that I pat the space beside her leg.

Maes ruffles her hair. Mitchell gawks at her like she said she’s never burped.

“Never?” he asks, in disbelief. “Never?”

“Never.”

“Fuck it. Bring in your Monopoly set tomorrow, Brown.”

It’s almost funny how he knows I *have* a Monopoly set.

“We’re playing.” He claps his hands together, a thunderous clap, as if to say, “I have spoken.”

“Done. On the jar and on Monopoly.”

Mitchell leans forward on his stool and holds onto the thighs of his britches. He says with a certain degree of cockiness, “I take Econ. Prepare yourself.”

“One does not,” I say, “have to be good at Econ to play Monopoly.”

“I always cheated,” Maes says.

“Maes.”

“Whatever it takes,” she says. She writes digits along the lines of the jar: 500, 1000, 1,500, all the way up to the painfully specific \$6,305, even though our target is \$5,505.

I pull out a piece of notebook paper, fold it, then tear along the lines. I draw a cash

symbol on it and slip it into the jar. One dollar down, one thousand, nine hundred and one dollars to go.

I stare at the jar. I don't say aloud that thirteen is an unlucky number.

*

We talk about *En* and gear up for Avery's selection, *Aishiteruze Baby*. At the rate we're going, we figure we'll be done with the first few volumes of *En* by the end of the week since the entire series isn't out in English yet. That means we'll either have to be patient or read fan-made scanlations* online. Eventually, Mitchell gets up to take a call. I can't hear who he's talking to, but the expression on his face—the tight frown, the tighter eyebrows—tells me it's someone he'd rather not be dealing with. I struggle to hear him say, as he leaves the room, something about tabs.

When four-thirty rolls around, Mitchell and Avery part ways, Mitchell to help out at work, Avery to do something involving her Aunt Shannon. Maes and I are alone. Finally, later arrives.

“Take me home with you.”

This is not what I expect Maes to say. In fact, this is the furthest thing from what I expect of Maes, especially since I hadn't expected Maes to say much at all. In my head, when I played the most likely scenario, I figured I would do most of the talking, i.e., apologizing, and Maes would do the listening.

“What?”

“Let's go,” she says. She picks up her messenger bag then grabs my backpack and heads for the door. I bury the money jar in the bottom of one of the supply cabinets and follow her. I can't find the words to protest.

I end up taking Maes home with me, traveling down I-459 North until I get to the Trussville exit, heading along the winding curves of Lakeshore until I end up on the Huffman side, till I'm where Huffman meets Lakeshore meets the beginning of Clay Chalkville. There, in that area, in that trifecta of lower, middle, upper-middleclass housing, I end up at home, the dark green split-level on a quiet road.

I park in the driveway, and Maes pulls up behind me. Mom and Dad's cars aren't there. Byron's got soccer practice until six, and Terrence's mom usually takes him and Terrence out for a snack before she drops off Byron. I let out a silent "yes" and scoot out.

I practically run to the front door, Maes following close behind me. When we enter, I shut the door tight and deadbolt it.

"What?" Maes asks.

"Nothing." I slow the pace.

Mom keeps house like she's every day expecting company. Our beige carpet is clean as the day it came to us. The walls are paneled—a depressing, dark brown color—but Mom's pale-green and pale-pink sofas, glass tables, and glass lamps struggle to soften the place. Mom's an old soul, far as housekeeping is concerned, and everything's neat and in its place.

Maes walks into the great room and immediately heads for the china cabinet full of angels. She leans in and looks from angel to angel. She seems mesmerized by them—by their wings, by their skin black as mine, brown as Percy's, by their white robes and curly hair and parted lips, ready to sing.

"Do you think Atheists will make it to Heaven? If we're wrong?"

I know she doesn't mean it in a mocking way.

"I think you have as much a chance as the rest of us."

She straightens her back and eases her hands into her pockets.

“Let’s go upstairs,” I say and head for the stairs.

Maes follows. “You move fast.”

I think about telling her that she’s easy, but decide against it. I’m still not sure what kind of terms we’re on. I pull out a set of keys and unlock my door—the first door at the top of the stairs— from the outside.

“Wow. How much porn do you have?”

“A lot.” I place my bag inside of my closet. Maes has taken a seat on my bed. “You don’t work today?”

She doesn’t respond, so I take this to mean an obvious no. She doesn’t talk much about work. I think she feels guilty that she’s got it easy.

I shut and lock the bedroom door. “Well.”

“Let’s watch something.”

“I’m not watching porn with you.”

She points to Lady. “Let’s watch something. A live action.”

Because I’m weak and because I took her to see prostitutes and because I’m the reason we may or may not be going to AX, I relent. I sit beside her on my twin-sized bed, half my body leaning off of it, and open up Lady.

Maes takes Lady from me and goes to Crunchyroll. She scans through a list of live action videos before settling on *Ravioli*, a Korean drama about chefs. She pulls off her messenger bag, opens it up, and produces a large, unopened bag of Wild Berry Skittles.

I lean back against my headboard, and she settles into the spot beside me.

Maes is the first girl who’s ever been in my room, and if I’m being real honest about it,

she's the first girl who's ever been in my house to see me. Unless you want to count elementary-school birthday parties.

If I'm being even more honest about it, girls aren't allowed to be here, not when both my parents are out, the door's shut, and there's nothing to stop us from performing the call of the wild. That is, if Maes and I had the kind of relationship where Maes didn't think dicks were Satanic and I had any of the skills required to convince a girl to have sex with me.

Ravioli is about a school teacher who dreams of being a pastry chef. Thing is, she can't cook, but she insists on testing out her creations on her students. Maes and I sit there, backs to a board, shoulders almost bumping against one another, Skittles pouring into us like water. We laugh at the same parts, both squinting eyes at subtitles, both snorting at coincidental meetings and partings. By the time the first episode is halfway over, I have learned to say *yes*, *no*, and *father* in Korean.

"I'm Korean," Maes says as a commercial uploads.

"I know," I tell her. "You told me before."

"I don't speak any Korean."

"I don't speak any African."

"I thought you were Barbadian. And I don't think Africans speak 'African.'"

"Damn, would that be better?" I ask. "Can you do a Barbadian accent?"

She shakes her head.

"Oh well." I watch the screen. A long advertisement about dog food plays. "Your parents don't speak it either?"

"I don't regret putting the panties on the car." She strums her fingers along the bottom of my laptop. It's funny, because it's something I might do.

She plucks at the skirt she's wearing over her jeans. "Love is a sacred thing, Lincoln." I nod like I one-hundred-percent understand what she's saying. And then, I really do try to understand.

Love is a sacred thing. That seems simple enough, honest enough. It's why people go to churches and cut cakes and jump over brooms in the company of hundreds of people who love, like, or admire them. It's why there's a permanent indentation on the finger that connects to the heart line, it's why my own heart beats out "Across the Stars" when Shanti passes me by. It's why ChiChi* from *Dragon Ball Z*, in spite of the danger Goku puts himself in, stays with him. Love is a sacred thing; no one will say otherwise.

She takes my laptop and sits her on the floor. She pours Skittles onto my bed, and I pretend that this doesn't bother me— that her authority in my room doesn't bother me; that her comfortableness around me doesn't bother me.

She arranges some of the Skittles into hearts—one heart pink, one heart blue. She says, in the Korean we've just learned, *yes*.

I nod again.

She arranges another set of Skittles, this time into two pink hearts. She shakes her head, no. *No, no, no*.

It takes me longer than it should to put one and one together. Maes is the kind of girl that loves other girls, the kind of person whose love here, in this city, isn't something sacred at all but sickening, despicable, damning. Maes's love is unholy, an abomination to Christian values, a disgusting, impure kind of lust—not love. The pink and blue hearts are fine, normal. But the pink and pink hearts, the hearts that are the same, are not. They're wrong. They're not allowed.

I know exactly what Maes is trying to tell me.

She scatters the two pink hearts, breaks them apart.

I immediately feel guilty. I took Maes there because I didn't want to be left out. I took her there because I didn't want to stay on the sidelines while Mitchell shone, not even for a moment, and this is what it turned into. I didn't mean to hurt Maes, but maybe I have. It's one thing to listen to her and Mitchell argue over Ohba's* representation of women in *Death Note*. It's another thing entirely to show her what real people do. I've broken the fiction. I took her out of a safe bubble and showed her instead a world as mean and true as can be.

And maybe, because I don't want to hurt her, or maybe, because I've been an Other all my life, I understand. I understand. Regardless of how I really feel about it, regardless of the words I can't say to Maes, I take the bag of Skittles and dump out what's left.

And then, I make a heart. One giant, perfect, rainbow colored heart around the pink and blue hearts and the scattered pink Skittles. In my own way, in my own words, I say the thing I cannot say.

Maes traces the heart with both hands, a slow and deliberate touch. She doesn't stop looking at it, not for a long time afterward.

I forget, for a moment, why it is we do what we do. Why Maes might prefer a life in books, where girls can love girls and magic exists and evil and good exist and love exists and we are all sacred, creating creators.

Ravioli plays in the background, muffled words we cannot understand.

*

I head for The Guitar Shop about an hour after Maes leaves. Now that I have Dad's permission and Percy's reluctant agreement, all that's left is to talk to Myrtle, my boss, and beg

for more hours at the shop.

Myrtle, a forty-year-old former pothead who likes to collect broken-beyond-repair bits of instruments and make sculptures out of them, also happens to have a soft spot for anime, albeit more nostalgically and less obsessively than myself. When I go in to pose the question of more hours, I frame my begging as personally as I can.

“If I don’t raise the money I can’t go to Anime Expo,” I say.

Myrtle’s a wide woman, the kind of lady you can tell used to be shaped like an eight but somewhere down the line the middle snapped. Now shaped like a very big O, she’s got limited mobility in her tiny shop, which is why she hired me in the first place.

Myrtle supports her chin with her hand. Her hands are beautiful. Callused, hard, cracking. You can tell she’s done nothing but jammed for the past forty-something years—and nods her head. “Anime Expo is where now?”

“California.”

“California,” Myrtle says. “And you need how many hours?”

I had to adjust the math after Percy’s addition. Instead of \$7.25 for 15 hours, which would only bring me a total of \$1,528, I now need to work 25 hours for a grand total of \$2,180. I tell Myrtle as much.

“Twenty-five hours?”

“Right.” I normally work from five to nine, nine-ten, when the store closes, or later, if Myrtle wants me to help her restock things or wants to fool around with the instruments, which is fine by me.

She squirms around on her stool. I don’t know why she doesn’t buy a chair with a back.

“I don’t really need that much help, if I’m honest with you,” Myrtle says.

Negotiating with my parents is one thing. Negotiating with someone who doesn't owe me anything is another. I can't guilt-trip her like I could if my parents had said no. With Myrtle, I actually have to bring something to the table.

"I'll do anything," I say.

"You already do pretty much everything."

I didn't expect that level of honesty. Myrtle's not what I'd call lazy, but given her weight and her age and her limited mobility and all those cigarettes she's smoked, she can't get around like she supposedly used to. This means she spends most of her time behind the counter, ringing up customers or dictating or giving advice.

I don't want to drop to my knees and beg this woman. I wish I lived in a place where that kind of behavior was acceptable and got the job done, but I don't.

Myrtle scratches her scalp—blonde, in contrast to the rest of her hair which has been dyed black for as long as I've known her, an inch over a year—and gives a come-hither signal with her finger.

I step closer.

"Tell you what, L," she says, "I been meaning to offer lessons. Nothing fancy—a beginner's introduction to guitar. How to choose your instrument, how to clean it, how to do the fingering, things like that. I haven't gotten around to it yet."

Please, don't ask me to do it. Please, don't ask me to interact with people I don't know. To be that kind of center.

"If you spearhead it, I'll give you the hours. No increase in pay or nothing, and you might have to stay a little later than usual, but if you can keep enrollment up and do a good job, I'll bump you up to eighteen hours."

Eighteen? But I need twenty-five. I'm about to say as much when Myrtle speaks.

“Eighteen’s all I can afford. Business isn’t great, thanks to the Guitar Center down the way.”

I need time to think. I need pen and paper and my chart back on Lady. I need a moment to consider my other options. I need to do anything but communicate with other people.

Myrtle’s watching me. She’s waiting for my answer, and even though I’d rather do almost anything else—scrub the pavement outside, reroof the storefront, retiling the bathroom, I know what I have to do. Shakily, I hold out my hand.

“Thank you,” I say. “It’s a deal.”

*

I go home and run to my room. I pull up “Link’s Monthly Earnings” on spreadsheet. I type in Myrtle’s offer. When I do the math I come up short:

$\$7.25$ (per hour) \times 18 (hours per week) \times 4 (weeks/one month) = $\$522$ per month
 $\$522 - \20 (guitar) - $\$40$ (gas) - $\$40$ (taxes) = $\$422$ per month
 $\$422 \times 4$ (months) = $\$1,688$

I need at least $\$1,902$ to make it to AX without any merchandise money, which is at least $\$200$, or emergency funds, which is at least $\$100$, and Myrtle’s offer leaves me $\$214$ under even the minimum requirement. And there’s no possible way to earn the extra $\$514$ through church gigs or Bible Study.

I close Lady. I’m the most fucked I’ve ever been.

Heavy-hearted and lead-footed, I go downstairs to eat. Dad and Byron are seated at the table, each eating a bowl of Moose Tracks ice cream with a side of Oreos. I didn’t actually have to go in to work today, but Myrtle let me help out around the shop since I was already there to beg for more hours.

I melt into my seat and rest my forehead on the table. Beside me, Byron's spoon clanks against the side of his bowl. I rest my chin on the table and inhale all the sugar. Dad breaks an Oreo in half with his spoon.

A plate is almost literally thrown at me. I sit right up.

Mom's not even peeking in my direction. She's already headed back over to the stove.

"Ooh, you're in trouble!" Byron says. He snickers.

My pork chops are tough, my mashed potatoes are watery, and my roll has been burned on all sides. I am indeed in trouble.

Dad eats a spoonful of ice cream and glances at me. I know that glance. *I'd hate to be you.*

I swirl the mashed potatoes around with my fork. Used to be, Mom was proud of me for working hard and working late, and when I came home there was a plate heaped with food. If she made the meal before her shift began, I'd even find a note: "Don't overdo it" or "Clean your plate" or "Good night, I love you." Nowadays, I find this.

I'm kind of pissed off. I understand that she's mad at me for trying to go to AX even though she's all but shouted that I can't, but food warfare is cruel. If she'd let me go alone—if she'd trust me to be responsible—then I wouldn't be sitting here eating dry pork chops and trying to decide how I'm going to earn the extra \$500 I need for AX.

I drop my fork. I've barely taken two bites.

"Done?" Byron asks.

Mom washes the dishes. She doesn't turn around when she says, "Don't even think of getting ice cream if you're going to leave all that food on your plate."

I rise and avoid Dad's and Byron's eyes.

I go to bed hungry.

CHAPTER FIVE

February is the length of an OVA*, a six-episode run that leaves a bitter aftertaste. I don't receive any chocolates from Shanti. There is no love confession on the fourteenth or the fifteenth or the cold, dry days that follow it. Only Avery gives me chocolate, handmade and in the shape of a crooked heart. She gives one to each of us, *giri-choco*, friendship chocolate, to say that we are not alone in our loneliness.

Valentine's Day works differently for Maes and Mitchell. The more I get to know them, the more I feel what they feel for Avery. With Mitchell, it's nervousness. No girl's ever been this close to him, this far from him, this kind to him, and it confuses. For Maes, it's something different. It's maternal and sisterly and romantic, incestuous, a family tree that won't split.

Shanti. What do I do when the girl I like knows I like her but doesn't say anything? Speaking to her gives me the same anxiety as speaking in front of the class. I can't breathe. I can't count out beats. If this were an anime I'd know what to do. Maes and Avery and even Mitchell would help me. We'd plan an outing somewhere—to a theme park in an anime, but since this is Birmingham and not Tokyo, the Museum will have to do. We'd start off as a group—we'd need a third guy for this, just so our numbers are even. I'd ask Noah, my lab partner, to do it for me—but eventually we'd separate in the Chinese pottery exhibit. It would be me and Shanti only, save for some Zhou Dynasty vases, and I'd turn to her with mouth open and she'd interrupt—

“I've had a crush on you since you transferred.”

And that would be that. She would have my heart and I'd have hers and we'd go on awkwardly, making small declarations of love until finally, finally I'd obtain something—a hand

hold or something, and Maes and company would be just around the corner peeking in, giving me a thumbs up.

This doesn't happen. That's February. Intermixed with that is Black History Month. We're singing Negro spirituals, crossing old bridges, linking arms like those floral crowns girls weaved as girls. We are a community united.

And we are full of it. Full of lies, full of kindness, full of desires, full of impossibilities. We are a city burning with passion. But I'm weary of the flame. Because love, as well as hatred, burns equally as bright in the dark. Because I'm reliving history in Miss Dubois's class. Because we learned that Sidney Smyer, president of the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, on a business trip to Tokyo in 1961 was ill-received when the people of Japan heard news of the Freedom Riders being beaten black and cobalt-blue in Birmingham.

We burn on, right into March. I take on more hours at The Guitar Shop, signing up for every Saturday and Sunday shift available. My hands are black pavement. I've got calluses as hard as tacks from fiddling with the fret, sliding on the neck, strumming along the body. My fingertips are more cracked than all of Five Mile Road, harder than any French quiz.

But this is how it has to be. I'm losing sleep. I'm doing school from eight to three-fifteen, then work on most days from five to ten. By the time I arrive home I only have ten minutes to eat and then about an hour to do any of the homework I couldn't do while my boss took one of her several smoke breaks. By midnight I'm exhausted, but there's no time for that. I pull out Castro, plug in my headphone amp, and play until two in the garage. It's three o'clock before I'm in bed, asleep. I'm up at 6:45 A.M. to drive Byron to school by 7:30 and me by 7:50. No more early morning manga readings on the steps. No more leisure mornings.

Our art room meetings grow shorter and shorter as the days grow longer and longer. We

take to meeting early on Saturdays for AX money updates and for homework sessions. We've finished *Aishiteruze Baby*—it ends like all shoujo ends, happily—and we're now on Maes's choice, *Red River*—evil queen gets girl sucked into ancient Hattusa—but the reading is slow going. Mid-terms are coming up and I wish some evil queen would spirit me away too. We hunker down in corners of the room and study on the days Mitchell and I aren't at work. Sometimes, we meet in the middle; Maes and I formulate equations, Avery and I trudge through history, Maes and Avery explain to one another how St. Peter's Basilica mimics the arms of God. Mitchell sticks to himself. We don't bother asking too much about it since he's protective of his work, but he's got stacks of papers and manila files a foot high.

Avery is absent a lot these days. She's always running off with her Aunt Shannon or her mother or her grandmother. She wears dresses; her hands gleam a little cleaner. The art room gets a little lonely.

I read *En* whenever I can. Kenny and Kenji discover that they can send each other more than letters. They place all kinds of treasures into their covers. They trade seashells and pencils. They trade pebbles and secrets. They trade comic books.

Kenny tells Kenji about Superman, the hero in a red cape. He can bound over buildings, see through walls, survive barrages of bullets. Kenji is mesmerized by this. There's nothing like Superman in Japan, no man in a long red cape to save the dimming days and a war-scorned country. He wonders and then he asks, in a letter to Kenny, whether Superman could have survived B-san, the name the Japanese—always polite—gave to the atomic bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Go dedicates a full page to this question; there are no other panels, no action lines, no anything but the crinkled paper with the kanji turned roman alphabet: Could Superman have survived the bombings? Could he have saved us?

It's a tough question and Kenny's only ten. He doesn't know anything, nothing about physics or war or what it takes to damn 246,000 people. In the next panel, Go shows Kenny sitting on a rock at the beach, watching the waves rip across the shore. His back is to the readers and his shoulders are slouched. The paper flutters in his hand.

By the end of the first week in March we're tired out. We need a break from Spanish and French and economics. We decide the best medicine is to watch anime. We decide the best medicine is a change of scenery.

We were once an industrial city. We poured iron at Sloss Furnace, where red pipes hang like entrails covered in green algae or kudzu or something like algae and kudzu. We made iron for engines and pipes and piston rings, but now we use the furnace for summer barbeques and concerts and metal works classes, assisted, terrifyingly enough, by Mitchell on occasions. The place is old, it's been around since the late 1800s, something we were told in history class, something I remember because I remember numbers. Sloss got an upgrade in the early 1900s, more upgrades in '31. The whole city was on the move then, trying to keep up with the times. Around then, Sloss Quarters were built, downtown cottages for black workers, my great uncle Otis included. I wonder how much smoke they inhaled. I wonder how much smoke they're still inhaling.

Sloss is haunted. People have been attacked, caught on fire, mind-fucked. Spirits flicker. Strange noises are heard. A whistle blows when nobody's around to blow it. People say it's haunted by the workers who died here and want retribution for their sacrifices. But instead of retribution they get Sloss Fright Furnace in October, an annual Halloween event where the furnace is turned into a madhouse, trails so dark you can't see your feet, rusted red pipes peeking out, walls half undone, something blowing on your neck.

The furnace doesn't seem like much from the Interstate. But up close, you can smell the fire. I inhale sulfur; the scent of it burns my nose.

Under the overpass, Maes, Avery, and I curl up on the hoods of our cars. The sky's that blank page kind of white, filtered through the cement structures of 1st Avenue. We're not supposed to be down here, but Mitchell let them know we were coming, and the Sloss folks don't bother us.

We're waiting for Mitchell to get off work. In the meantime, I thumb through my computer drive and hunt for what I want to show Maes and Avery.

Sakamichi no Apollon's been in my queue for months now. It's a sacred series to me because it's directed by Shinichiro Watanabe with music by Yoko Kanno, and this powerful duo hasn't been together since *Cowboy Bebop*, and I don't have the oxygen to describe how powerful *Bebop* is; how much the music—a combination of rock, jazz, and ballads—shaped the story. How each episode title nods toward something melodious—"Bohemian Rhapsody," named for the Queen song, "My Funny Valentine," named for the jazz composition performed by everyone from Sinatra to Davis to the great beyond, "Sympathy for the Devil," where the lyrics of The Rolling Stones song form the plot—a man out of time, looking for a name—and the soul of the story—ending with episodes twenty-five and twenty-six, "The Real Folk Blues" part one and two, the title sharing the same name as the series' end song, poured out by Mai Yamane, a Japanese woman with the kind of voice that is smoky evenings in a jazz club crowded down with a big-boned fella who plays the keys, some slick guy on sax, Muddy Waters himself plucking on a rhythmic guitar, saying *now when I was a young boy, at the age of five, my mother said I was gonna be the greatest man alive*, not minding that Yamane's singing his song, that Kanno's composed it, that Yuho Iwasoto, lyricist, was bold enough to put her name right there in the

lyrics—*sitting in muddy water isn't such a bad life*. Yamane sings in perfect English.

Maes watches the sky. Her skin's got a gluey, sticky hue to it from the sweat. It's only 73, but since it was 50 yesterday, I think we're all kind of surprised.

"The English translation is called 'Kids on the Slope.' The music is—" I stop. The music is. The music is. It's drums, it's percussions, it's the piano. It's the 20s then the 30s and then a skyrocket into the 50s and 60s—the bebop style jazz of improvisation and ambition. It's a lot like *Cowboy Bebop*—it's East meets West. Jazz meets Japan. "Jazz."

"I like jazz," Maes says. She fans her face.

I knew she would. I can hear the furnace howling, the crunching of gears and the grinding of machines. Chimney smoke puffs up big as an atomic bomb.

Avery snuggles further into Maes's lap. If she's hot, she's not showing it. Her toe scrapes the top of Maes's hood, but neither Maes nor Avery seems to notice.

I want to explain to them that I've started and stopped this series thirty-three times because I can't get past the opening theme song, "Sakamichi no Melody." The guitar strums that open the song, the blare of the trumpets that follow it, the high pitched and raspy voice of Yuki who sings it. It feels like the beginning of spring. It feels like a March afternoon looking out of Miss Dubois's window and wishing I could be anywhere else.

I was driven by that sound. I downloaded every *Sakamichi no Apollon* song that I could find and listened. I didn't try to play, I listened. I was gearing up for the series. I was ready to meet the three high school students who, in 1966 Japan, let jazz change their lives.

"Bunch a vagabonds," Mitchell says.

I turn around to respond to that, but what I see stops me. Mitchell has to be dog-tired. Exhausted. He's got dirt and grime stuck to him like wadded up gum. He's got on an old pair of

Levi's and a dirty Alabama red cotton shirt. He's still wearing his working boots, clay-brown. It's like he just got done shooting an Old Spice commercial.

"Well, what are y'all doing?" He goes from Maes and Avery to me. "What?"

"Mitcchan looks very sexy," Avery says. She coos from Maes's lap.

"Well, I smell like shit," Mitchell says. He locks his jaw and gazes up at the overpass. I'm not sure, but I think he might be blushing.

I change topics. "*Sakamichi no Apollon?*"

Avery shoots up and claps her hands together. "Mitcchan looks like Toby-kun!"

Mitchell asks, very slowly, "Who is Toby?"

"Toby-kun! He's Avery's doll. Well, one of them. Avery collects dolls."

"That sounds hell a creepy." Mitchell squats down near the ground and swipes at his eyebrow. He's trying to stop a trail of dirt from getting into his eyes.

"It isn't! They're very pretty."

Maes slides off the hood of her car and opens the driver's door. She digs.

"Creepy," Mitchell says again. He picks at one of the calluses living on his hands.

"Pretty!"

Maes shuts her car door and goes to Mitchell. She hands him a couple of napkins, and Mitchell takes them without any fuss. He nods in thanks and she nods back. He speaks up.

"Creepy."

"Let's go," Avery says. She puffs out her cheeks like a blowfish and stamps her feet. Gravel and dust. "Let's go to Avery's house and see the dolls."

"I don't want to go to your house." Mitchell wipes at the sweat. "I don't have a change a clothes."

I shut down Lady. Whether we end up at Avery's or not, it's clear to me that *Sakamichi no Apollon* has been temporarily forgotten and this is a series that deserves more than half-assed attention.

Avery jumps back. "Avery doesn't care! She wants Mitchell to come."

"Don't want to."

"It'll be fun." Avery wiggles her arm through Mitchell's, who tries desperately to keep his arms flat to his side. "Link wants to go."

"Sure do." I don't, but I don't want to agree with Mitchell.

"Your parents won't care if you take three of us home with you?" Maes asks.

"Nope." Avery snuggles up to Mitchell and inhales.

"Does everything have to go your way?" Mitchell asks her. I've never seen him appear so defeated and disgusted.

"Resistance is futile, Mitcchan."

*

Mitchell and I follow Maes through English Village, which can only be described as a collection of German cottages plopped down in Mountain Brook. Any moment now, I'm expecting a woman named Heidi to bustle through the doors of one of these brown-brick cottages and offer me freshly baked bread. Why English Village looks like a German-Dutch lovechild from Candy Land is beyond me, and since Avery and Maes aren't with me, I can't ask them. All I know is, the quaintness—I don't think I've ever used this word before—the quaintness of the place is giving me the creeps. Even the Joe Muggs Coffee, as big a business as it is, is housed in one of these brown-brick, white-trimmed, gray-roofed cottages right beside stores so local I've never heard the names before.

We drive past shop after shop. People are out, all of them white, holding shopping bags or drinking cups of coffee or standing around chatting. Trees and shrubs and other green stuff make a picturesque backdrop, and all I need for this scene to be complete is for Snow White to enter singing, a collection of woodland creatures following. I call Maes.

Avery answers. “Link-kun! Konnichiwa!”

“What’s with all the houses?” I correct myself as I drive through a light and up a slight incline. “Cottages.”

“Aren’t they pretty? It’s Link-kun, Maes.”

I hear a click and then a bit of static, enough to let me know I’m now on speaker.

“German cottages. Why?”

“They’re Tudor, although they do resemble Romanesque-Italian style buildings that you might find in Italy.” It’s Maes, and art history is really paying off.

Even though it’s Maes I’ve called, it’s Avery who explains to me that Mountain Brook is split into three villages: English, Crestline, and Mountain Brook. I’ve been through English before, during a fourth grade trip to the Botanical Gardens and the Birmingham Zoo, both of which are either in Mountain Brook or close by. Zoning here is weird because Brookies like to think of themselves as a separate community from Birmingham, when really they’re one and the same. What is and what isn’t Mountain Brook appears very, very important.

Avery’s on some kind of narrative roll. She tells me about the nearby nature preserves and the parks and the creeks and the country club, but we’re in the residential part of town now. I zone her out to admire the trees touching branch to branch and the houses, some of them not much larger than the houses in my own neighborhood, but clean and kept. You’d be hard pressed to find so much as a stray cigarette butt in a gutter. Country clubs don’t interest me—I’d thought

they were a myth—but this cleanliness does. Everything is perfect. The roads, the houses, the people out jogging. This is nothing like the other sides of Birmingham.

If the Muffin Man were alive and well, this would be Drury Lane. Instead, it's Cahaba, Sterling, Country Club Street, Salisbury. Instead, it's a tree-lined street with a tongue of asphalt splitting the neighborhoods into two, Pleasantville perfect rows. This is Mountain Brook, AL. This is the Tiny Kingdom.

This is not how I expected to spend my Saturday. I follow Maes down a winding road, amazed at how smooth the pavement feels, unlike all of Roebuck, which feels, more or less, like driving over a large pair of cros. The further we wind into the neighborhood, the further we move away from the other Birmingham, the more majestic things become. Houses evolve from tiny one-stories into two-stories into three-stories, into sprawling masterpieces reminiscent of the English manors I've seen in Victorian manga. We've gone straight up Phantomville Estate.

Maes pulls over in front of what can only be called a mansion.

All I can manage is, "And this?"

What little I know of architecture tells me that the house is Spanish in style, a white-walled, terracotta-roofed mammoth that resembles something out of one of my mom's Lifetime movies. If this were Friday the thirteenth, if Maes, Mitchell, and I were alone and it were raining and the sun wasn't out and the power was off, I'd think that this would be the exact kind of house where an axe murderer would haunt us for the next five hours and I would be the first to die.

Maes, not Avery, is the one to tell me that Avery's house is Mediterranean Revival—Spanish, like I'd thought. She says something about stucco facades and comments on the red roof. It's a damn nice house. I step out of my car and Mitchell squeezes out of his, scrapes the bottom of his boots across the running board of his truck. Mitchell and I meet by the hood of my

car and kind of stare up at the wealth.

“Jesus fuck.” I’m not longer listening to Maes. My cellphone is limp in my hand.

“Fuck,” Mitchell says.

And we stare on. I don’t know much about acreage, but I’m sure that the McAllister mansion sits on acres and acres of real estate. There’s a huge fountain out front, off to the left center, large enough that I don’t doubt it could grant any quarter wish you could throw at it. Off to the right and up the driveway, I spot an immaculately kept white pickup and an original yellow Volkswagen bug. But behind those two cars, behind those two plain cars and placed safely in one of the garages, I see a car covered in a tarp. I don’t know what it is. It could be an Aston Martin but I’ve never actually seen an Aston Martin so I can’t say. Whatever it is, something tells me it’s meant to be revered. Mitchell sees it too.

Avery and Maes walk to us. Avery loops her arm through Maes’s.

Maes snatches away my cell phone and presses end. She returns it to me, and I slip it in my pocket like this interaction is perfectly normal.

The girls are loving this, and I don’t mean they’re loving Mitchell and mine’s wonderstruck stares, but they *are* enjoying talking architecture, talking money. Maes points out the arches visible from the ground floor of the mansion, how part of the place’s weight is supported by carefully sculpted columns. She points at the iron balcony cutouts punched from sections of the second story.

“Can they see the back?” Maes asks.

Avery nods yes. “Of course! Follow the leader.” Avery lets go of Maes’s arm and marches to the front door, which is really more of an entrance than a door.

Mitchell, who didn’t want to come in the first place, holds his tongue and follows with

me behind him. Maes brings up the rear.

We enter the kingdom and stand in the mouth of a giant entryway, the ceilings a strain-your-neck kind of high. The entryway is open—no, all of the rooms are open, and we can see straight into what I assume is the living room, and I have to say that for a house that's this magnificent, the furniture is pretty ordinary in appearance. I mean, I'm sure it's expensive, because it appears sort of antique, but it doesn't seem gaudy. Doesn't seem like it's trying too hard.

There's white stone everywhere, and, when we peer up, we can see clear into the second story, blocked off by iron railings. Mitchell and I both gaze up into the space, then give one another a glance that normally passes between brothers. Close to the entry stands a spiral staircase, the kind you envision royalty gliding down, the kind you figure Cinderella ends up with after she marries the prince and essentially tells her stepsisters to stew in the pitiful lives they've built for themselves. The stairs are iron and old, the way old things that are sturdy are. Maes catches me scrutinizing them and remarks how they're probably not original to the home. *The home*, she calls it.

Avery kicks off her peach Toms near the entry door and saunters straight ahead. Mitchell removes his boots, turns them upside down, and places them near the door. I've never seen him this careful. Maes follows Avery, then Mitchell and I, an amorphous blob of we-are-not-worthy, follow Maes. Avery leads us into the kitchen, white and marble, easily twice and a half as large as my great room, the largest room in my house. Sunlight bounces off the countertop and nearly blinds me.

The kitchen smells like oranges. Avery crosses the floor and slides open—she has to tug a little, since she's small and all—a glass door. She leads us outside to what I'd call a patio but

must really have some different, fancier name that I don't bother asking Maes about. Outside, there are more columns and more archways, but with wooden, reclining chairs gathered in bunches underneath. Dead center, surrounded by more recliners, sinks a soft-edged, Olympic-long pool. Beyond that, I can see gardens.

Mitchell doesn't say a damn thing to me but I completely know what he's thinking: how do we know this girl? How can people afford to live like this? Why can't we live half as well?

"Who's hungry?" Avery asks. "I bet Mitcchan and Link-kun are! Let's go." Avery turns on her heels and steps inside with Maes. Mitchell follows, and I take one last glance at the pool then head back inside.

Avery walks to the fridge, barefoot and comfortable, and pulls out four key-lime sodas in glass bottles. She sits them down on the island in the middle of the kitchen, and Maes and I take a seat on barstools in front of the same island. Mitchell chooses to stand.

If we were cooler people, these would be key-lime wine-coolers or beer or whatever the hell cool people drink and not sodas. But seeing as we aren't, we pop tops and guzzle.

Avery sits out boxes of Piyoko treats and Pocky—strawberry, vanilla, chocolate, man-flavored. She smiles at me, and even though I'm still kind of overwhelmed by the level of wealth before me, we both sort of chuckle about it. Mitchell and Maes shrug, confused.

"Avery," I say, rolling my mostly full bottle around in my palms, "nice house." All this decadence and I still haven't told them that working at The Guitar shop will leave me \$514, 214 of those dollars essential. My fingers have a slight vibrato. All at once, I feel exhausted.

"It's a fucking palace. What are you, royalty?" Mitchell sounds as uneasy as I feel. His voice warbles. He stands in one spot, trying, I guess, not to track any dirt onto the white floor.

"Miticchan, you'll embarrass Avery with that kind of talk." Avery leans across the island

and taps Mitchell's nose with her bottle. She sits back down on her stool and takes a sip. Mitchell swipes at his nose like he's swatting away a bee.

She's fearlessly fifteen, fearlessly rich. The bottom of her feet are as dirty as Mitchell's boots, covered in caked-on soot from the art room and gym floors, soot so old it'll never wash off. The watch she's wearing, I know, came from a cereal box. And yet, here she is, rich as a cheesecake, bubbly as champagne, at home in her own skin.

Maes nibbles on a stick of man Pocky.

I shake my head at the irony and go for the vanilla.

We all sit there, for a moment, enjoying the Pocky and the soda and the brightness of Avery's perfectly clean kitchen. No one tells someone to shut the hell up, no one asks how far along we're at in *Red River*. We're quiet; uncharacteristically quiet.

The moment passes, and Avery leads us back toward the stairway, up the spiral staircase and through the long, long hallway—there are pictures of old McAllisters, pictures of the original store, pictures of an old, petticoat Birmingham—to Avery's room which is, by all accounts, the most girlish room I have ever had the discomfort of stepping into. It is also the only girl's room I have ever stepped into. The walls are painted in stripes of lime-green and lemon-yellow, a headache-inducing wonderfuck of color. I wait for my eyes to adjust, then notice that she has a huge, gray bed shaped like Totoro, the mystical forest spirit from Miyazaki's *My Neighbor Totoro**. Christmas tree lights encased in boxes hang from the wall behind the bed.

I feel a giant hand grip my shoulder. I stare at Mitchell. What has possessed him to touch me?

He points, slack-jawed and mesmerized, to the left of me.

There's a wall of dolls seated on a red, tiered, raised platform. Big dolls, little dolls, Asian

dolls, white dolls, wooden dolls, stacking dolls, wide-eyed, blue-eyed, evil-eyed dolls staring at us like something out of a Japanese horror film. Mitchell and I take a well-timed step back.

Maes walks over to the wall of weird, squats down, and observes. “Hey girls.”

“That one’s Melanie-chan!” Avery says for what I assume is mine and Mitchell’s benefit. “She’s ball jointed. She’s from the Super Dollfie Volks collection.”

Slowly, with what I imagine is the same level of hesitance as a guy approaching a girl for prom, Mitchell and I drift over to Maes. I stand beside her and will myself to examine the creepy dolls.

Melanie-chan, as Avery calls her, has eggshell-white skin, large, luminous brown eyes, tiny, pink lips. Her hair is the deepest shade of black, long and with bangs. Something about her—the gray and pink shading around her eyes—makes her appear sickly, like something Tim Burton should have created. I don’t have to be a doll expert to know that Avery’s dolls are expensive.

Mitchell picks her up and squints at her. “Sure is an ugly thing.”

“Melanie-chan isn’t ugly!” Avery shouts. “Melanie-chan is beautiful!” She stumps her feet and her breasts jump.

Mitchell sits the doll back among her sisters. “Whatever you say.”

“Avery says she’s beautiful.” She kneels down and picks up another doll. “Here’s Toby-kun!”

Toby-kun’s face is angular and white. Mitchell’s is moon-shaped and dotted with splotches of red and freckles. Toby-kun, if he were a real person, couldn’t weigh more than 123 pounds; Mitchell weights two Tobys and then some.

“He’s nothing like me.”

“Sure he is!” Avery points, firmly, at Toby-kun’s hair, the same burnt-orange as Mitchell’s.

“That’s like saying Maes looks like Aki Maeda because she’s Asian.”

She doesn’t. Aki Maeda played Noriko in the live action adaptation of *Battle Royale*, the series about a bunch of teenagers the government forces to fight to the death on an island (The original, more badass predecessor of *The Hunger Games*). It was one of the few live actions we watched together, and I’m not convinced that Mitchell doesn’t unload himself to Aki’s image.

“Please don’t drag me into this.”

“Toby-kun is exactly like Mitcchan.” Avery places Toby-kun back on his pedestal. “There are so many beautiful dolls in the world. Avery has American Girl dolls, too, you know.” She points to the back row. Mitchell and I watch on, uninterested, as Avery spouts out information about *hinamatsuri*, the celebrated Japanese doll festival.

I spy three wall-length bookcases, wall-length being the length of three mes in Avery’s room, stocked with manga, art books, and fairytales. I spy a television, at least 40 inches in size, seated inside of a large piece of furniture. I spy two video game systems. I spy a smaller bookcase overstuffed with games. I spy a pink shag rug, a crystal or glass chandelier, *Sailor Moon* posters, *Call of Duty* posters, posters from yaoi—boys’ love—manga I don’t care to know the name of. I spy stuffed animals—bears, tigers, armadillos, monkeys, Tuscans, kangaroos, elephants, moose. I spy a corkboard wall covered in drawings, in detailed notes, in names, in pencil sketches, in pen sketches, in hours.

I approach the wall, even though I’ve told myself it’s best to remain as still as I can. I touch one of the drawings. It’s covered in pencil markings, strays and lines that refused to be erased. It’s a town. A Japanese town filled with closely constructed buildings, sidewalks, people.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” Maes asks me. She stands beside me now, admiring the same picture.

“It’s something else.”

Avery stands between us. She swings her arms around our necks, which is funny, because she has to stand on tip toes. “Is it nice?” she asks. “Is it something?”

It’s Mitchell who answers. “Yeah.”

Maes and I agree. We try to piece together a story through the drawings. Is this a hero’s quest or a love story? Slice-of-life or adventure? What do I call the hero? What do I call the villain?

“It’s getting late,” Mitchell says. “I got homework.” No one reminds him it’s Saturday.

This is enough to break the silence. Avery lets us go. We all head out the door and down the spiral stairs with Avery leading the way.

We make it as far as the entry way before we hear a woman’s voice. “Avery? Avery, are you home?”

Collectively, we turn toward the sound of the voice.

Two women appear, one petite and slender, a brunette holding a shopping bag. The other woman, blonde and lower to the ground, round with dignity, stares at the four of us.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know you had friends visiting,” the brunette says.

“Hi Mom,” Avery says. All the sugar in her voice is gone.

“Well, I must be invisible,” says the blonde. To say that she has a slight Southern accent is to say that I have a slight love of anime music soundtracks. She doesn’t have a drawl, but an outpour of words that run together. She waves Avery over, and Avery obliges. She pats down Avery’s hair.

“Hi, Aunt Shannon.”

I know this woman's complete life story. She's Avery's aunt, on her father's side, the older of two daughters. She's not a beautiful woman, but not an especially ugly one, either. But her sister is a doll, a golden girl like Avery, a center. When they were young Aunt Shannon fell in love with the boy next door. Not a literal boy-next-door, but a boy close-by enough to see every day. But the boy fell for her sister and Aunt Shannon fell to the shadows. She was as rich as her sister, as smart as her sister, as well-mannered as her sister. In fact, she was more than these things; she was better in almost every way. But the not boy-next-door loved the younger sister. So Aunt Shannon grew cold. Then Aunt Shannon grew sad. And then, Aunt Shannon grew angry. She grew real angry. She knew she'd never be a center. She focused on her younger brother, Avery's father. She taught him all there was to know about being perfect, well-mannered, respectable. She married for money. She siphoned the riches of others.

Avery doesn't say much of anything at all to any of us, to Maes who tightens her lips or Mitchell who rubs his hands against his shirt or me who stands there, watching and remembering what Avery's told us. Aunt Shannon has no children and not for lack of trying. The gods have not been kind to her and she has learned to be unkind back. She grips Avery. She pampers her with things, with words, with affection. It could be love. It could be something else.

A minute has passed.

"I'm going to see my friends out," Avery says. She removes herself from her aunt's grip.

"We're back from the Chamber Luncheon. Rowan was there, you should have come." It's Avery's mother. She smiles at Avery. "Well, next time then. Good-bye, all." She waves at the three of us; we wave back.

Aunt Shannon glances our way and I know the expression. It is a less-than look, a want-not look, a you-are-not-worthy look. But what I don't know, what surprises me, even, is that it

isn't aimed at only me. She gives Maes and Mitchell that same treatment. That same appalling glare. I didn't think that was possible.

Avery is pink as a summer peach. She practically shoves us out of the door. She shuts it airtight behind us.

She stands under the entry of her door. She's barefoot, small. She shakes, visibly. All of her power is gone.

"Can we stop by tomorrow?"

Avery gazes at Maes. It's a gaze of confusion.

Maes reaches out and runs her palm along the side of Avery's face. "Can we?"

"We'll be back tomorrow," Mitchell says. "Around three. I got work early on."

I check my watch. It's almost time for my shift. "We'll be back tomorrow."

Avery snuggles into Maes's palm. She places her hands on top of Maes's and caves in toward Maes while Mitchell heads for his car. I follow. At the bottom of the yard, a ways in front of Mitchell's truck, sits a two-toned Lexus.

Mitchell kicks one of the rims.

"It's her aunt's car," I say, remembering the time her aunt picked her up from school.

Mitchell kicks it again. I allow a half smile. I don't congratulate him or anything, but when I pass him, our elbows bump in understanding. I pile into my car, he piles into his, and together, we escape the Tiny Kingdom.

The neighborhood's more than a little nice. Churches stand beside homes, safe and secluded enough that people can walk to praise. You'd be hard pressed to find that gumwad I was searching for earlier. But what you will find are joggers, alone and in small packs, mothers with industrial-sized strollers and ponytailed hair, and young girls and old men and people my

parents' age. You'll find neighbors, like my neighbors, that know each other by name, telephone number, and aspirations. You will find lawyers screwing their young wives, then driving halfway across town to screw their friends' young wives.

Or is that a lie? You'll find families that love each other, families that want to kill one another, families that are completely ambivalent. You'll find one-hundred-dollar jeans made from five-dollar material. You'll find girls who haven't studied for their history midterms, girls who are valedictorians and girls who can't stand their mothers, so they'll flunk every subject, every test, just to get her to notice her, hate her. Most of these things you'll find in any neighborhood. Mostly, you'll just find people.

Today, you'll find me, sick to my stomach. I don't know what it is about this place. Maybe it's the smell of all the tree sap or the sturdiness of the houses or the bright faces of the joggers, but something about this place is draining the life out of me. I feel physically ill, like when Miss Moretti asks me a question during government. It's that same feeling of not having any of the answers. But's it tougher than that. Here, I don't even know the questions. Here, you'll find a sinking Lincoln.

But you will also find, in the back of a neighborhood, on acres of land, a girl pinning pieces of her dream on a corkboard. A girl who's every word is sugar, whose smile is delved out equally to believers and nonbelievers. You will find Avery McAllister, bright, beautiful, a some day's dreamer. You will find a girl creating a something out of nothing, a world outside from inside her head.

*

We make good on our word. We go to Avery's the next day, Mitchell, Maes, and I. We're a row of ordinary pulling into a life of luxury. It's Sunday and sunny, still too cool for anything

other than long sleeves. I pass a line of joggers, girls as young as me. They don't see me. They're in their element.

We park out front of Avery's. She's already outside, waiting for us. Her hair's down, not in one of her usual styles, and her dress is plain and blue. She tugs her jacket around her shoulders and jumps up when she sees us. She runs to our line of cars.

Avery raps on Maes's window, and I can hear her shout, after Maes rolls down the glass, "Avery wants to go on an adventure today!"

Mitchell cuts his engine and climbs out of his car. Her lumbers over to Avery.

"Mitcchan! Avery wants to go an adventure today."

"Tough, I left my transformation brooch in my other car."

Avery hits him lightly, right on the chest. "Mitcchan is funny. Avery does not want to fight evil. She wants to learn driving."

I stick my head out of my window and stare at Maes's car until Maes turns around in her seat and looks back at me. I smack my left hand against my head, as if to say "Why?" and Maes shakes her head and shrugs.

"What's brought this on all a sudden?" Mitchell asks. "You never asked about it before."

Avery hides her hands behind her back and rocks on the balls of her feet. "Avery will be 16 very, very soon."

"Why didn't you take driver's ed?" Maes asks.

"Because it doesn't do anything for Avery's transcripts."

Immediately, I know that this isn't Avery talking. Avery cares about grades about as much as Usagi* from *Sailor Moon* does which is to say, not at all. This is something Avery's parents have suggested.

“Have you ever driven, Avery?”

Avery brings her fingers together. Her thumb and index are maybe a half-inch apart.

“Chotto.”

“Chotto,” I say. I squint at the space between her fingers. “That’s a little less than ‘a little bit.’”

There’s a low rumbling sound from behind me. I sit back in my seat and take a peek in my rearview mirror. A two-toned Lexus makes a slow trip around the corner.

Avery turns in that direction. I don’t mean anything romantic, because Avery is Avery and I’m Link and our whatever we have isn’t like that at all, is never going to be like that. But Avery is beautiful in profile. Not cute, not hot, beautiful. It’s something factual and quantifiable, like math. As she stares off at the Lexus, as she watches its approach, as the line of her jaw improves by the glare of the sun, she looks like a Roman warrior about to be shipped off to war.

Mitchell grabs her hand and drags her to his car. Avery doesn’t put up a fuss. He helps her up into the cab of his truck, goes around the front of the engine, taps the trunk of my car and points forward, then gets inside the driver’s seat.

Maes pulls off and I follow her and Mitchell follows me. Aunt Shannon’s horn honks, a desperate wail in the suburban silence. We slice through the walls of trees and slip out of the twists and turns of Avery’s neighborhood. Maes stops at a red light, and I know exactly where we are: Montevallo Road.

I text Avery and Maes. I’ve got an idea. I pass Maes. I drive her down Montevallo, a whole six minutes without any lights, past the Winn Dixie shopping center. In just six minutes, we’ve left the wealth behind. I turn onto Oporto Madrid and drive past the McDonald’s on Montclair, the CVS, the generic Chinese restaurant beside the pawn shop with the sign that says

“WE BUY GUNS AND JEWELRY,” the recently constructed Eastwood Village shopping center built on top of the carcass of Eastwood Mall, once an atriumed, indoor mall that had been on decline since my birth in 1996, now a shopping complex with a Wal-Mart, a Ross, a Shoe Carnival.

I stop at a red light, and an old man cruises by on a wheelchair. I know this old man. He sits out front of the nearby TJ Maxx my brother works at and tries to persuade you to buy candy for some coins. Used to be, he sat out front of the Food World, one of the last real grocery stores in Roebuck, but when that shut down, he came out here, to Crestwood.

At the light between the Olive Garden and the carwash, I make a left on Crestwood. I drive us up the incline of a road.

Century Plaza Mall. Or, where Century Plaza used to be when Century Plaza existed. It died with Eastwood Mall, as if the two were shoujo manga-style lovers, as if they both couldn't handle the decline in clientele. Nowadays, the only action this place sees is from truckers making pit stops and the carnival on wheels that pulls up every once and awhile. I take us toward the back of the mall, to where Sears used to be, and park.

I get out of the car and the wind roars. It slams against the blackened-glass windows and blows bits of broken glass and gravel across the empty parking lot. I don't know what happened to it, the last mall of Birmingham. Some say its slow death began when the neighborhood changed from rich and middle class to poor. We're moments from Mountain Brook, one of the wealthiest suburbs in Alabama, in the United States, but also in Birmingham, poor Birmingham. Other people say it's because the mall couldn't compete with The Galleria, the huge mall in Hoover where Mom and Aunt Retta do their Black Friday shopping.

Maes and Mitchell and Avery join me. We've parked our cars in a blocky circle, and

when we meet, we meet in the center.

“Here?” Mitchell asks. Before him, the empty brick building stands intact. It’s massive, not Galleria massive, but still pretty impressive. Behind him, the rugged outlines of copper hills make a background.

Maes kicks a rock to me and I kick it back. “Century Plaza.”

“I know what it is,” he says, “I live in Leeds.”

I learned something new. I figured Mitchell didn’t live in Trussville or Mountain Brook or Roebuck, but none of us has ever really asked him where he does live. Guess that’s not surprising, seeing as how I don’t know where Maes lives, either.

“Yup.” I address Avery. “Since Mitchell has a truck, you can’t practice in his.”

“We can use my car,” Maes says. “I trust Avery.”

Avery hugs Maes tight around the waist. She mashes her face against Maes’s armpit.

“We’ll take turns teaching her.” Maes leads Avery to her car. The two of them get in, Avery on the driver’s side, Maes on the passenger’s side.

“Because this is how I wanted to spend my Sunday,” I mutter.

“No fucking kidding,” Mitchell says. He crosses his arms over the girth of his chest.

We both stand there, arms crossed, and watch the car. Maes and Avery talk, and it’s clear from all the pointing that Maes does that Avery doesn’t know what she’s gotten herself into.

Eventually, the car starts. Exhaust seeps out, the taillights flash, and Avery grips the steering wheel.

“My sister wanted one.”

The car creeps forward, like a stray cat that can’t decide whether to trust the hand that tries to feed it.

“What?” I didn’t know Mitchell even had a sister.

“Those dolls. The American Girl ones.” Mitchell has the concentration of a Go master. He watches Avery advance, square for square, eating up territory along the way. The car bumps and weaves over gravel and broken bits of cement so cracked it looks like it’s on stage one of puberty.

It’s not for me to say anything.

“Couldn’t afford one.” His fists tighten, wedged under his armpits.

I won’t say anything. I watch the car start and stop and start again. Successions of failure and triumph.

“Sometimes, I kind a hate her.” He watches the car. He’s doing what I do with my hands sometimes: open fist, close fist.

Which her? I want to ask. The sister I’ve never met or the girl you might be in love with? The car keeps its motions. I can’t say anything.

Maes’s hand shoots out of the passenger’s window. She waves it—frantically for Maes—and Mitchell and I hustle over to the car.

I bend down to Maes’s window.

“You two climb in back.” Maes has a hand on her head.

We two climb in back. Before we can even buckle up, Avery shoots forward.

“Wait until everyone’s safely inside the vehicle,” Maes cautions.

Avery slams on the brakes and even though she’s not going very fast, everyone jerks forward. “Avery is sorry.” Avery smiles at us through the rearview mirror. She waits until we’re safely buckled in before she drives on.

Thirty seconds later, she jerks to a stop. Start, stop, start times three, stop. There haven’t

been this many jerking moves since masturbation was invented.

“Christ, Avery,” Mitchell says and hits the back of her seat. Avery flinches through the mirror. “Handle it carefully.”

“Avery is sorry.”

Maes takes a lighter approach. “Are you nervous?”

“Chotto.”

“Don’t worry about us.” Maes motions to the three of us. “The car’s not going to let you fly out of control.” She places her hand on top of Avery’s. “Don’t worry.”

Avery turns her hand palm side up. She holds onto Maes’s hand and squeezes.

*

There’s a filler episode in *Dragon Ball Z*, right before the big battle with the androids, where Goku and Piccolo*—the heroes—finally have a little downtime between being dead and saving the world (they only die a couple of thousand times during the series. Someone always revives them using the wish-granting dragonballs.) ChiChi, Goku’s wife, urges the two superheroes to apply for driver’s licenses so that they might be a little more helpful, because, you know, saving the world isn’t being helpful enough. Anyway, Goku and Piccolo go to the DMV to get their licenses, both dressed like Will Smith from his *Fresh Prince* days. Of course, they fuck up the test.

Watching Avery drive is a lot like watching Goku and Piccolo. The attempt is earnest, the effort is there, but the result is ugly. There are no explosions, no near death experiences. There’s boredom. We whittle away thirty minutes with Avery behind the wheel.

We discover, through trial and error, that Avery does better when her mind’s on things other than driving. We attempt to relax her.

We try to start up our version of shiritori, a Japanese word game where someone says a noun—in our case, the name of an anime or manga character—and the next person has to say another noun that begins with the last hiragana character of the name just said. It only takes two turns to realize that this requires too much concentration on the part of our driver.

“How’s the saving going?” Maes asks.

Mitchell and I audibly groan, then look at each other, disgusted because we’ve done something simultaneously.

Maes and Avery haven’t touched the money jar since they each deposited 1,220 play-dollars and Mitchell and Maes schooled Avery and me in Monopoly.

“I put in a few hundred,” Mitchell says.

“Yeah, me too.” What I don’t say is that Mitchell’s few hundred is larger than my few hundred even though I have to earn nearly 700 more dollars than any of them.

“Turn left,” Maes says. We’re still in the parking lot, only now, after a half-hour of driving in straight lines, we have produced obstacles. Avery wraps around a light post, then swerves to avoid a carjack. We take a dip in an unanticipated spot of unsmooth pavement. Maes glances back at Mitchell and me.

She hasn’t bought it. She knows my noncommittal answer means I’m not earning nearly enough for AX. In the past month, I’ve only managed to bring in around three hundred dollars, and with plane ticket prices rising the closer we get, I’ve got to come up with a plan soon.

“Bird shit,” Mitchell says. He points to the front window.

Avery flips the wrong switch, and the blinker lights up to signal left, then right. She shuts off the blinkers, flips another switch and yelps when the wipers spring on. Before Maes can correct her, she figures out how to adjust the intensity.

When Maes turns back toward me, I make it a point to stare out of the window. I'm tired. I'm tired of driving in circles, I'm tired of losing sleep, I'm tired of answering to the money jar.

Avery hits a bump.

I close my eyes. I have a hard time believing that any self-respecting twenty-first century kid could be this bad at driving. Who hasn't taken the wheel while their parent fastens a seatbelt? Who hasn't driven in a straight line? Who hasn't done donuts in the parking lot with his Cousin Bee?

Maybe Avery's faking it for attention. No, if she were faking it, she wouldn't fake it this badly. Besides, I can't see Avery doing something like that. Sure, she likes attention, but she's no liar. What is it, then? How come every other kid I know has driven at least once before?

I want to feel sorry for her but I won't let myself. Avery has everything—a mansion, two parents, a pool, an expensive, extensive doll collection—while I'm not even sure I'll be able to produce the last \$514 for our trip. I'm desperate, ready to search for old toys in the attic to auction off, ready to sell blood, ready to donate my body to science. And Avery? All Avery has to do is shut up and drive.

*

We call it a day. Maes assigns Avery a C for driving and a B for effort. They decide, for better or for worse, to practice again before Avery can take the driver's test. She's not the worst driver on the road, but there's not a chance in hell she's ready.

The four of us head back to Avery's. When we arrive, after moments of driving through the Tiny Kingdom, we see a pea-green Impala parked in front of the house closest to Avery's. Green as it is, it sticks out like a stray hair. Aunt Shannon's car is gone.

Avery catches me eyeing the car as she climbs out of Maes's. "What?"

“I don’t know.”

She leans in through my car window. The scoop of her dress curves around her neckline.

“Thank you for spending all day with Avery.” She stretches out the *all* to the point of being explicit.

“Thanks for not killing us, I guess.”

She grins, blows me a kiss, then bounces along to Mitchell’s truck. Mitchell refuses to roll down his window for her, instead, yells through the glass. *You’re the worst driver on the whole goddamn planet.*

After goodbyes, as Avery waves, hands over head, Maes pulls off, then Mitchell, then me. Through my rearview mirror, almost when my vision fails me, I see Avery unwind. The balls of her feet touch the ground, her tiptoes given a rest. Her arms are dragged down to her waist. The glow is gone, the brightness. In my rearview mirror, in the pink light of dusk, Avery shrinks smaller than her five-foot frame. She looks weak.

She looks lonely.

CHAPTER SIX

The atmosphere is heavy, last episode of *Cowboy Bebop* heavy. No one's bothered to open the windows, and everyone's sitting down. Avery has called an emergency meet-up. I fall into the empty seat. The hard wooden surface nearly breaks my ass, but I ignore the throbbing that bounces down my leg.

"I'm sorry, Link," Avery says before I can even put down my bag. She's got her lime-green North Face jacket zipped all the way to her chin. Her hair's done up in her signature Witch Hunter Robin style. Her skirt is in violation of any and every school code.

"What happened?"

"She failed her Spanish test," Maes says. She folds her arms over her stomach and grips her waist.

"Si?"

"Si."

"And?" I don't mean to sound unsympathetic, but it's no secret that Avery can't speak Spanish. She's good at remembering some of the words—yes, no, hello, kitten—but terrible when it comes to any kind of sentence structure. It's like she's collected all the dragon balls but still doesn't have the means to summon the dragon.

"I had a parent-teacher conference," Avery says. That explains her after-school absence yesterday, which I'd attributed to Aunt Shannon stuff. "Dad and Mom were upset, but understanding. Not everyone can be good at everything."

Avery's upset enough that her speech pattern has gone normal. She continues. "But of course, Aunt Shannon's at home not ten minutes after we are. When she hears about what

happens—how I have a D average and how I bombed the last test—she goes insane. She says that maybe I'd have more time to study if I wasn't hung up on art and those 'annie-me' cartoons."

Mitchell, Maes, and I nod our heads to show that we're listening.

"That woman's the devil," Avery says. "I swear, it's like she can feel things. Like how she knew what was important to me. But instead of suggesting that I hang out less or that I hire a tutor, she tells my parents that they should cancel my trip to California. Can you believe that?" Avery clears her throat, and in her best Aunt Shannon voice says, "McAllisters do not flunk Spanish." Avery puts both hands on her head and lowers half her body between her knees.

"Avery really fucked up, you guys," she says. "And is really, really sorry."

Maes immediately goes to console her. She wraps her arms around Avery's shoulders. Avery's the bright one among us, and without her energy, the whole group dynamic takes a nosedive.

Everything wrong in Avery's life seems to involve Aunt Shannon, and I get the feeling that her aunt's latest intervention isn't coincidentally related to the unannounced weekend visit Maes, Mitchell, and I had two weeks ago.

Surprisingly, Mitchell decides to console Avery too.

"Can't you unfuck up?" Mitchell asks.

"What?"

"It's only March. Can't you pull your grades up?"

"What do you mean, 'only March?' It's March. Mid-March. We've got ten weeks, not counting Spring Break," I remind him. I don't mean to be, but I'm a little happy that Avery's screwed up. For once, it's not me—and I guess Mitchell—who drags down the group.

“Well it only took her ten weeks to fuck it up,” Mitchell says. His vocabulary has colored. “It shouldn’t take her too much longer to undo it.”

“It’s not impossible, I guess,” Avery says.

“It’s more than unimpossible, it’s possible. You’re not stupid,” Mitchell says. “You just don’t try. If you can memorize rōmaji* then you can memorize Spanish.”

I swallow hard. Mitchell has a point. Japanese is a level four language and Spanish is a level two. If Avery can memorize every rōmaji lyric in every L’Arc~en~Ciel and Dir En Grey song then she should have no problem memorizing “Feliz Navidad.”

“You mean it?” Avery does one of her exaggerated snuffles and gazes up at Mitchell with those big blue eyes of hers.

Even from my place two spaces away from him, I can tell that Mitchell’s panties get in a knot.

“Yeah,” he says. “I’ll even help you.” Panties fully knotted.

“You will?” Avery asks.

I hate to say it, but Mitchell Harris is the best student among us. I tend to stay right in the middle with Bs and Cs, the Cs usually getting me reprimanded by Mom but lately, after the incident, regarded as adjusting. Avery’s report card has Bs, Cs, and now a D while Maes’s reads like an ABBA album. Mitchell makes straight As. With Mitchell’s help, Avery might be able to make it, which means it’s back to just me—and Mitchell, I guess—failing.

“I think Avery’s family can afford to hire a real tutor,” I say.

“She’s already shown that she can’t handle authority,” Mitchell says. “Figure she’ll do better with someone her own age. Anyway, I can manage.”

“If Mitchell’s volunteering, then Mitchell should teach her. He has ten weeks to turn a D into a C, and I believe he can do it.”

“Not quite,” Avery says. “I actually kinda sorta need to make a B. Cs aren’t really considered passing in my house.”

“You make a C in nearly everything else,” I say. I’m more heavily animated than a Kyoto Animation production at this point. My fly hands up, incredulously, at the high standards her aunt has set for her.

“I’m kind of a naughty child.” Avery rubs the back of her head and grins at me.

“Okay.” I suck in air through my mouth. “Let’s hash this out. You want Mitchell to tutor you on getting a B when you could hire a real tutor.”

“If I hire a professional tutor then Aunt Shannon will be right. I’m stupid.” She’s in my eyes. “I’m not stupid. I can’t be, can I?”

I sigh without meaning to. “No.”

“I told you I can tutor her and I meant it. Avery’s really smart, she just doesn’t apply herself.”

“Well,” Maes says. “That settles that. Mitchell will tutor. And of course, Link and I will help if we can.”

“Yeah,” Mitchell says. He shoves his hands into the front pocket of his Tide pullover. “That’d be nice.”

“Oh, thank you Mitcchan,” Avery says. She goes to hug him around his waist but Mitchell nearly jumps off his stool to avoid her. Avery blinks confused.

“Yeah,” he says. “Welcome.” He grabs his overstuffed backpack and hoists it over his shoulder. He picks up Avery’s backpack and heaves it across the other. “Come on. Tutoring starts now.”

“Now? But what about *Sakamichi no Apollon*?” Avery asks. We were supposed to give it a shot today, as a break, but I guess that’s not going to happen.

“It’ll have to wait. Come on.” Mitchell nods a goodbye to Maes and me, and exits.

Avery gives us a fleeting, weary smile before she stumbles out the door.

And then there were two. Maes stands, and then sits down on one of the art tables. The table is covered in butcher paper, but gray dust rockets into the air on contact.

“Think they’ll make it together?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Avery isn’t one for hard schoolwork. And Mitchell’s such a tight ass. He’ll probably use a harisen on her.” Harisen, large paper fans, being to the Japanese what rulers are to Catholic nuns. But at least the harisens are made of paper.

“She’s a Tasuki fan, so she’ll probably love that.” Tasuki of *Fushigi Yugi** uses a special harisen that shoots fire. He’s the kind of wild, fox-type character that Avery loves.

“I got a dirty image in my head.”

“You would.”

“I wouldn’t,” I say. “Anyway, I guess we’ll have to wait and see. I guess he can’t *hurt* her grades.”

“Why can’t you admit that Mitchell’s smart?”

“We leave it to them,” I say. “We’ve got our own stuff to worry about. Like making music.”

I've been putting it off for the sake of getting to AX, but I can barely take it anymore. Ever since I heard Maes sing—a Korean Mai Yamane, a Whitney—I've wanted her to form a band with me. I think we could do it. I think we could rule Japan. I could be the next Jero White*. We could be the next big things.

“Link,” she says. “Not this again. I told you, I like you and I like singing with you, but I don't want to be in a band.”

“Fine, but tell me why already.”

“I don't want to.”

“It can't be that. You're talented and you're not shy and you've got stage presence written all over you.” I scrutinize her from head to toe. That devil-may-care attitude, that androgyny, that way her shoelaces are always untied. It screams Punk Rock. It screams we could be something big, together.

“I know you don't want to spend the rest of your life working for your dad.”

“And how would you know that?”

I bluff. “Because you've got talent.”

“Dad's a pediatrician,” Maes says. She looks at her fingernails, pinches off ragged skin. “That's enough.”

She's never told me this. I try to imagine Maes surrounded by kids, but it doesn't sit right. She's gentle, sure, motherly, but not like this. She's not that type of kind. *We* need her more than children ever could. “You'll be the first pediatrician musician.”

She laughs. “Flattery will get you nowhere.” She turns away from me, and puts her legs into a pretzel position.

“I’m not trying to get into your pants. I’m trying to get you on stage with me.” I’m talking with my hands now. They rise with excitement then drop when I realize I’m getting absolutely nowhere with this.

“You’re plenty talented. You can make it on your own.”

“You sing better than anyone I’ve ever heard.” Much better than me. “And I don’t want to do it alone. I want to do it with you. We could win, Maes. We could be big in Japan.” The truth is, I can’t do it alone. I need her. The thought of one day packing up and moving across the world alone scares me almost as much as staying scares me.

“I’d rather be small here,” she says.

“Is that your idea of a good life?” I won’t be lonely with Maes. I trust her one hundred times more than Avery, a googolplex more than Mitchell.

“Yeah,” she says after a moment. “Yeah it is.”

She leans over the table and scoops up her bag before I can say anything else. She doesn’t even say good-bye as she leaves. She sort of nods her head to let me know that she still realizes I exist. And then I’m left alone in a very heavy, very dark art room that stinks of wasted talent.

*

The halls of Vulcan High School become a little more Spanish. Somewhere, dressed in white cloaks and chanting over a fire, Governor Bentley and Senator Beason are pissed. But back at the high school, Mitchell Harris has gone straight-up teacher on Avery. He’s hitting her hard with studying, coming at her with a level of seriousness only an anime fanboy could possess. I catch them going over notes by the lockers. Avery, who never sits still, who never stops talking, stands there and listens to Mitchell. It’s like he’s cast some kind of spell on her. A hypnotic scratching of the brain. Avery seems tired.

That's about all I see of Mitchell and Avery outside of class. Mitchell has imposed a strict "no art room" rule for Avery, and with their absence, Maes and I decide we'd better keep our own art room rendezvouses simple and sweet. We greet each other, talk a bit about *Red River*, which is actually pretty all right for a shoujo and as violent as any shounen when you factor in all the backstabbing that goes on. Maes and I part ways, and then I drive to The Guitar Shop, where I now—in addition to cleaning the restroom, clerking, stocking, answering questions, answering phone calls, cleaning the windows, dusting the instruments, giving sound checks, and generally performing like the Black Butler—give people a very, very basic introduction to guitar.

"Classes" started during the second week in February, and since it's now the second week of March and classes are only held once a week, we're ready to learn how to properly hold a guitar. This is what I'm working with: a white dude who's got to be pushing seventy; two horny white freshmen who can't keep their hands off each other, little lovesick bastards; one white kid, about my age, who generally seems pretty down to Mars; my lab partner, Noah, whom I mistakenly confided in over a nitrous oxide experiment; a Hispanic girl, middle school, who I have nicknamed—in my head—"Little Kickass," because she seems to know what the hell it is she's doing.

The first day of class was disastrous, with a lot of stuttering and beat counting on my part, and a lot of light-half-on stares on the faces of everybody but Little Kickass, Mars, and Noah. Four classes later and I still stutter, but at least I've stopped counting beats and can remember how to move like a human and not like a robot with a windup pin stuck up his ass.

Today, everyone's seated in their chairs, lined up in what used to be the break room in the back of the shop. The room's pretty vacant, except for an old microwave and a mini fridge that houses Myrtle's "happy time" drinks. The students have all got their guitars—beginner's

acoustics that Myrtle and I helped each handpick, after convincing the Lovesick Bastards that no, an electric was not right for them, collectively—seated in their lap, except for Lovesick Bastard Girl who’s incorrectly strumming hers in what is, I assume, an effort to serenade her boyfriend.

I wish this were Japan and I was allowed to humiliate my students, either by hitting them with a harisen or by making them stand outside of the room holding two heavy pails of water. Since I don’t have pails or harisen or any authority, I settle for clearing my throat.

“Heeey,” I say, stuttering to Lovesick Bastard Girl, “you’re going to mess up the tuuning. Do you want to retune thaaaat?”

She stops serenading, glances at me. She K-drama sighs, and places her Yamaha on her lap.

In real life—I mean, if I weren’t teaching—I wouldn’t even be able to talk to this girl. Not because she’s the beautiful type, but because she’s the I-won’t-give-anybody-who-isn’t-my-boyfriend-the-time-of-day type.

I begin the lesson before anyone else can act out.

“Everybody stand up.” When I speak, there’s a metallic taste on the back of my tongue that seems to be moving from the middle of my chest. I try to ignore it.

Everybody stands up. The overhead light dims, brightens, dims.

I sit down in my seat. I balance Taxim, Myrtle’s teaching guitar, on my right thigh with the neck pointed upward a bit. “Sit down. Like I’m sitting. Balance on your right thigh and make sure the neck’s up a little. Sit straight back.”

Everyone does what they’re told, though Seventy’s neck is up a bit too much and Lovesick Bastard Girl’s practically straddling her Ibanez between her thighs. I ask Seventy to

lower the neck a little and tell Lovesick Bastard Girl to adjust. Her boyfriend happily helps her out.

Noah squirms in his seat. He seems genuinely excited that we've finally made it to the holding stage of guitar playing, and with Noah's luck with girls—he strikes out nine-point five-times out of ten—this is the closest thing to a female he's held since December, when his old girlfriend dumped him for talking to Katerina, a fellow chemist.

I explain to everybody how their left arms—everyone's right-handed—shouldn't be used to balance or hold the guitar, but the Lovesick Bastards do it anyway, and I have to correct them two times before they finally get it. Little Kickass's being her usual perfect self, keeping her right hand level with the strings, gently supporting the neck with her left hand.

From here, I teach them not to deaden the sound by pulling the guitar too close or too far away from their chest and not to choke the neck.

“You're choking it,” I say to Lovesick Bastard Girl. “Thumb behind.”

“She's always choking,” her boyfriend says.

Lovesick Bastard Girl punches him in the chest, and Noah and Mars and Little Kickass all snicker. Seventy seems confused.

If I make an analogy, will she hold the damn neck correctly? Gently, not too much pulling all at once. Save something for later.

“This is hard,” Seventy says. The Lovesicks snicker.

Seventy's having difficulty balancing the guitar on his leg, but before I can go to help, Mars is on it. He sets the old guy right and I give them both a head nod. Good work.

Lovesick Bastard Boy says, “We're all set. Let's play this shit.”

I grab my pick. “That's another lesson. Today, everyone needs to beee comfortaaaable.”

Lovesick Bastard Boy mimics my stutters and his girlfriend gets a fucking kick out of it. Noah turns in his chair to them both and glares—my God, what a devoted lab partner—and Mars watches the ceiling like he’s waiting for heavenly intervention.

Little Kickass speaks. “Shut up and listen. You’re holding your guitar all wrong anyways. Are. You. Retarded?”

Seventy cackles. He understands this.

Lovesick Bastard Boy locks his teeth and I think he wants to smack Little Kickass and because I don’t have the energy to stop any bloodshed, I backtrack and count beats. Half beats, whole beats, half beats, quarter beats—I want everyone to shut the hell up so I can concentrate but instead everyone’s talking at once, the Lovesick Bastards arguing with Little Kickass, Mars telling them to leave the middle schooler alone, Seventy asking Noah if he’s got his fingering right, Noah scratching his head and shrugging because he’s not sure.

I play “Wild Horses,” by The Rolling Stones. There’s a Cowboy Bebop episode by the same name—episode nineteen—and even though the song sounds more country than I usually care for, the strumming is clear and clean and easy enough to hear above the noise everyone is making.

In the episode, Spike—the ex-syndicate member—takes his ship for repairs. He meets up with his mechanic, Doohan, and his mechanic’s assistant, a young ambiguously brown kid named Miles, and the three of them work to gather the parts Spike needs. It’s an episode where I really think the crew’s not gonna make it. At one point, toward the end of the episode, Spike’s headed for a direct collision with Earth. He’s spinning and spinning and spinning and gravity—there is none. I really think he’s going to die. But Spike keeps it cool. *Shikata ga nai*, it can’t be helped. Easy come, easy go this life.

I guess I was hoping I'd have one of those magical moments where the power of music silenced everyone into adoration, but when I finish the last note, the Lovesick Bastards are arguing amongst themselves, Mars is helping out the old man but still managing to glance at me—a hey, I'm multitasking but that was awesome—and Noah is either taking music notes or doing homework. None of Spike's coolness has worn off me.

Only Little Kickass is fully watching.

I'm going to have a panic attack and I can't even blame it on the grey ash this time. I'm here for the money, I'm here for the money, I still need five-hundred-and-fourteen extra dollars, and God, there's no way I can fuck up this teaching gig, because then I'll be even more behind and Mitchell Harris will fucking crucify me and I'm too young to be nailed to a cross and I'm too young for this kind of pressure and I'm too young for teaching people how to play the guitar and I'm too damn old not to know what the fuck I'm doing with my life.

*

I leave work and drive. I like driving. It's easy. Get on the road and stay in your lane. Signal before you turn. Stop at red lights, go on green lights. It's easy. It's me, my car, and enough CDs and music to take me to Heaven.

I drive through Trussville and listen to The Beatles' "I've Got a Feeling." I stop at the light before the interstate junction, right across from Hooter's and Lowes and Mickey D's. The song is a homunculus, born of two unfinished songs, Lennon's "Everybody Had a Hard Year," and McCartney's "I've Got a Feeling."

The light changes and I drive on past the Interstate, down Gadsden 31. I pass a gas station and a comic book shop I've never been to, located beside a gun shop. The houses nearby are low to the ground, like they're squatting to avoid a tornado I can't see, like the kind of twister that

tore through T-town a couple of years ago.

When the song was born, McCartney was newly wed and Lennon was going through a divorce, a downfall, Yoko Ono. Two sides of the same story, the beginning and the ending, wrapped up in one golden, glorious song.

The road curves. The sky isn't black yet. It's a purple-pink, a carnival kind of color. I'm in the middle of the song. I'm a rock's toss away from Roebuck which bleeds into Trussville, only it's a different kind of blood. They do a cover of this song in the manga *Beck: Mongolian Chop Squad*. In the manga, this Japanese kid named Koyuki* dreams of playing in America. I wish he could. I wish we could switch places—he could be here and I could be there and both our dreams would be true. The lyrics for the song are the same but the words sound different in Koyuki's English, his Japanese accent pressing down like a hard note. I like both versions.

The music helps. The vibrato in my hands is back to its normal pace. The stuttering of head and heart has stopped. I want to go to AX, but I'm still five-hundred-and-fourteen short with only two full months and a few extra weeks left to save. I'm frustrated. I've thought of applying for a second job, but I don't know where to start since I was lucky to secure the first one. I see guys my dad's age working at Burger King, busting tables at the Golden Corral, the last sit-down restaurant in Roebuck. They're fifty-plus, working jobs meant for people my age.

I drive through Roebuck. The vacant Food World, the vacant bridal store, the Interstate with half its lights off. I keep going. There's a golf course on my right, the most visible sign that this was once a neighborhood to be proud of, a sign that the community was going places. It's fenced in to either keep balls in or people out. I still see white guys come out occasionally, but most of the time I pass, it's empty.

Charlie Christian's "Solo Flight" plays by the time I pass the Krispy Kreme. The hot

sign's off, but the line is still longer than both of Maes's arms. A guy and a girl sit on the hood of a car next door, in front of the abandoned grocery store I never remember being opened. I pass Etheridge Brother's Barber Shop and East Lake with its flag after flag circling the perimeter. Nobody's jogging and I'm not sure if anybody ever does anymore. I usually stop and turn around when I see Krispy Kreme, but today I keep on, right into 1st Avenue.

It's nothing like my neighborhood, it's nothing like Avery's—quaint, Dutch, sanitized. The buildings are broken and old. The Rally's sign blinks. The adult bookstore sign doesn't. People walk—in groups, in solos, in twos. Guys my age and younger. Guys older. Girls.

I wonder where they work. I wonder if they're hiring. I wonder what it is they want but can't have. Do they like anime? Been blessed with *Bebop*. Stuck on *Full Metal*. Sworn to *En*. I can't be—

I swerve out of my lane and three cars honk. I adjust the wheel and straighten up. A car to my left passes me, and the passenger sticks his head out of his car to yell. I don't know when my eyes closed. I was thinking about being in a cowboy kind of funk. I was thinking about anime and trying to clear my head. I didn't mean to.

The fuck is your problem? I hear the driver ask.

I signal to get over at the next light. I turn down a street I've never been on, off 1st Avenue. I park, cut the engine, double check my doors. I put my head on the steering wheel. My problem is I'm tired.

I don't know how I make it home or how I creep into bed or what time it is when all I don't know happens. Byron is the one to wake me up in the morning and this is enough to startle me into full consciousness, because if Byron's up and I'm not then that means we're a kind of late I've only ever dreamed of. Mom's gone. Dad's gone. Percy was never here. It's Byron and

me and five minutes to ready myself. I wish my mom was the kind of nurse who brought home Adderall, but because she's not I shake all the way through brushing my teeth and throwing on whatever shirt and pants I can find. We leave the house, late as we've ever been, and this is one more thing to end another hard week.

*

“Fighting evil by moonlight!” Avery belts out of nowhere. “Winning love by daylight!” It's the theme song for *Sailor Moon*, and for some reason fifteen-year-old Avery thinks me and two-hundred-and-fifty-pound Mitchell want to dress up as Asian schoolgirl crime fighters. And while I'm not opposed to using the Gentle Uterus* attack and while I hear tell that Mitchell's got a great pair of legs, neither of us wants to run around in sailor fuku—uniform. That takes a kind of confidence I can't even begin to imagine.

“We're not doing *Sailor Moon*.” Picking a cosplay has been Nintendo-level hard thus far, what with the black kid—not a whole lot of black characters to choose from, especially group-wise, and Kenny from *En* is only ten—and Avery's insistence that Mitchell and I dress like sailor scouts.

“Why ever not, Mitcchan? You would make a beautiful Sailor Mars.” It's day fifteen of pull-Avery's-grades-up-or-we-can't-go-to-AX. Mitchell, after seeing a slight improvement in Avery's efforts, has allowed her a break today which is good, because Avery has tiny lemon wedges under her eyes. This doesn't stop her from singing the *Sailor Moon* theme song.

“Maes would be Sailor Mars,” I say. A Go Igarashi cosplay will happen; no discussion necessary.

Mitchell's lips form a line. I can see his teeth moving behind them.

“I wouldn’t mind being Mars. But I prefer Saturn. But I do like Mar’s Kushi-Gojin-Ro attack.”

“No! Mitcchan would be Mars.” Avery stumps her feet on the floor. Charcoal dust and dead skin cells scatter. Her skirt gets covered in the mixture, but she doesn’t seem to care.

“Next,” Mitchell barely squeaks out. I can tell he’s trying real hard not to tell Avery she’s annoying him today. He’s seemed worn out ever since he’s been tutoring her. He went into the arrangement with fanboy zeal, but lost it somewhere along the way, probably when he realized how bad a student Avery is.

“*Dragon Ball Z*,” I throw out.

“I want to be Goku,” Maes says.

“Me too!”

“We’ll all be Goku,” I say. Goku a Saiyan—an alien—who’s dropped on planet earth as a baby. While most Saiyan are known for *destroying* planets, Goku saves ours again and again. He’s the kind of guy that everybody likes. Well, except for Vegeta.

“Four Gokus?” asks Maes. “I like it. I like it a lot.”

“Keep it in mind if we don’t come up with something less weird,” Mitchell says. He nods to me. “Brown seems more Piccolo.” Piccolo’s a Namekian from the planet Namek*. He’s about seven feet tall. And green. He used to be evil, but good ol’ Goku reformed him.

“Well, you’re more a King Yama,” I say. “But four Gokus? Nobody else would do that.”

“If we’re not all Gokus then I want to be ChiChi?” Avery asks.

She’s got the upper half of Bulma. “ChiChi and not Bulma?”

ChiChi, like my own mother, is tough. She practically forces Goku to marry her—Goku would rather just eat a ham sandwich, if we’re being honest, but it happens—and then forces

their son, Gohan, to study every hour on the hour even though Gohan has powers; all Saiyans do. Bulma, on the other hand is big-boobed, big tempered, and smart. She has more hair changes than Haruhi, Avery's style muse, and if Avery should be one of the two she should be Bulma.

"Everyone would expect that."

"Yes, everyone at AX is expecting you," Mitchell says.

Avery frowns at him, a full bottom lip turned over. With what looks like a lot of effort, she manages to make her eyes quiver, her round blue pupils turning into shaky ellipses. The result is comical.

Mitchell rolls his eyes.

"You're getting kinda sassy," I say to him.

"Fuck off."

"Mitcchan's being a real stinker today." Avery circles around him and waves her arms up and down like she's trying to hypnotize him.

"The hell?" Mitchell asks her. He watches her until she drops out of sight, reappears, then drops out again.

"I'm casting a happy spell on you. I'm giving you some of my happiness."

"I don't want your happiness. It's weird."

"Mitcchan'll be a better person for it."

"By all means, give him the happiness," I say. "I'll even give him some of mine." I act like I'm flicking happiness at him.

"Your happiness reminds me of spirit fingers," Maes says.

"Shut up."

"Link, keep your happiness. It's too mellow. Mellow Yellow. Yellow," says Avery.

“*Cowboy Bebop?*” Maes asks.

“Aww, you figured out my Ed already.” Edward Wong Hau Pepelu Tivruski is known for her erratic speech patterns, her orange hair, and her hacking abilities. Avery possesses only one of these things.

“I think she’d make a good Ed,” I say.

“Yeah.”

“If Mitchell’s agreeing with me then it must be true.”

“Shut up,” Mitchell says.

“Avery as Ed, Mitchell as Jet, me as Faye,” Maes says.

“You as Vicious*,” I say. This makes me smile. Vicious is a guy, but Maes loves a good villain and probably wouldn’t mind crossplaying*.

“And you’ll be?”

“The black Spike.”

“Spike Lee?” Avery asks.

“Different Spike, Genius.”

“You’ve got the build,” says Maes.

I stand up straight and slide my hands into my pockets. I take one hand out, lean against an art table, and pretend to smoke. Instinctively, my right leg leans back against the table leg.

“All you need is the leisure suit,” Maes says.

“Let’s see your Vicious.” I’ve barely spoken the words before she snatches a yard-stick off the table behind her, holds it over her head like it’s a sword, and dives at me. I slip away from the table and let myself fall to the floor. Maes kneels over me, and since I don’t have any gun like objects nearby, I stick out my index finger and thumb while curling up the rest.

“You should see yourself,” Maes says. Her voice is low and throaty. Her limbs seem twice their normal length. She’s in it. “You’ve any idea what you look like right now?”

“What?”

“A ravenous beast.” She licks those pink lips of her. The action is almost undetectable. “It’s the same blood runs through us both. The blood of a wandering beast, hunting the blood of others.”

“I’ve bled all that kind of blood away.” It’s one of my favorite lines. It’s one of Spike’s best. Maes and I have seen this series about a million-and-two times. We know the words. We know exactly what we’re supposed to do.

“Then why are you still alive?” Maes screams the question at me. That low voice goes up a pitch, those brown eyes grow.

I “shoot” her in the shoulder and she stabs me in mine. She recoils and I scramble to my feet.

I run out the doors and Maes chases right behind me. I bolt through the open hallways. Link’s supposed to be scared of being seen. Of being watched. But Spike isn’t. Lockers, windows, doors, I pass by everything. I don’t see anything, I don’t hear anything. Not even the tread of Maes’s moccasins, and this is scary; it means she’s light on her feet. I see the door.

I burst through like a sunrise. I’m outside now. I run to the grassy spot that lines up with the top of the stairs. I turn toward Maes. She grabs me by the face and pretends to tighten her grip before she pushes me and I let myself fly backward, down into foot-high weeds that, appropriately, fly up and fall around me. Blades of grass like glass shards. In that moment, I have flashbacks. But the flashbacks aren’t Spike’s, they’re mine. Watching Bebop for the first time.

Meeting Maes. Stringing my guitar. The fall is maybe three feet. I can't stay in character. I land with a thud.

Mitchell and Avery clap, and not in a patronizing way, either. Where did they come from?

"Aww, why didn't we record this?" Avery asks. "Super cool."

"Actually went for the fall." Mitchell huffs, but I know he's impressed.

Maes holds out her hand to me and I take it. She pulls me up and pats my shoulder. "We kick ass."

"We do."

"Spike and Vicious!" Avery says.

The four of us come to a mutual agreement.

"All right Ed, Jet, show us what you got," I say.

"I'll pass," Mitchell says. "Can't beat that kind of senergy."

Avery nods her head in agreement. She plucks a strand of grass from my shirt. "You make an awesome team."

Tell Maes that. "Thanks."

"Enough of that," Mitchell says. "Let's talk cosplay. Pretty obvious we're doing something Bebop-related." He glances at the sky, the sun, the clouds, something up there.

"Can anybody sew?" I ask.

"Oh, fuck off," Maes says. "You look at me and Avery because we're girls."

"Ovaries!" Avery shouts.

"Well I know Mitchell can't sew." I glance in his general direction.

"Hands are too big," Mitchell says.

"The hell they are," I say and have a seat on the grass.

Maes sits down across from me. “I can, but I’m not sewing for you.”

“I can sew a teensy bit,” Avery says. “Buttons. Mostly, my nana helps.”

“Nana McAllister or Nana Masters?” Maes asks.

Avery shakes her head no. “Neither. Nana, my nanny.”

“That you even have a nanny is more than I can process at the moment,” I say.

She sits on the grass and folds her legs into a complicated twist.

“Doesn’t everyone?” she asks. Her words are sugar sweet.

“I call her *Mom*.”

“That you think Moms and nannies are the same thing is more than I can process right now,” says Maes. She snarls at me.

I edge away from Vicious. “Only Maes can sew. So the rest of us?”

“EBay,” says Mitchell.

“EBay it is.”

As cosplay goes, *Cowboy Bebop* won’t actually be all that bad. Spike wears a dark blue leisure suit, yellow button up, and what could be blue clown shoes. His hair is shaped into something like a dark black-green Jew-fro that won’t be completely impossible to recreate. Vicious will pose a greater challenge, but not by much. He favors a dark brown business suit, vest, shirt, and trousers. He wears a dark blue tie. His trench coat creates the bigger problem because it’s trimmed in gold with a gold tassel holding it together. Cosplaying as Vicious also means that Maes will either have to dye her hair platinum blonde or buy a wig. Seeing as how her hair is down to her back and Vicious’s hair is shoulder level, I imagine that she’ll go with a wig.

Then there's Jet Black. His futuristic jumpsuit is complicated, and his bionic arm is going to take some assembling. He's also partially bald, which wouldn't be a problem if Mitchell would commit to shaving his head. Avery as Ed? It can't be much simpler. She only needs a sleeveless white shirt, belly out, and a pair of black knee tights. No shoes required; orange wig a necessity.

"I think it's all doable," I say. "My dad probably has a leisure suit stuffed in a box."

"Please produce pictures of this," Maes says. "Does he look anything like you?"

Even though Maes has been to my house, I can't say that I really gave her the full tour. I pull out my phone and flip through my images. I hold the screen toward her, and Avery and Mitchell lean in.

"Jesus," Mitchell says. "Like twins."

"Mm," Avery says. "Only a different color. Your dad's tall!"

"Well, how tall's your dad?" I put my phone away.

"Average height. Much taller than Avery. Avery has his eyes." She smiles, and for the first time, I think that maybe I've got her home situation wrong. "Hey!"

"Say whatever you're going to say." It's Mitchell.

Avery crawls across the stretch of grass between us and leans in close to me. She cups her hands near my ear and whispers.

A tingling sensation shoots straight to my groin. Mitchell's got literal veins protruding from his neck. Proximity is king.

I nod my head, compose my thoughts, and stand. Avery pulls herself up. We stand back to back, her with one hand on her waist and one hand up and holding an imaginary pistol. I stand with one hand holding up my own imaginary pistol, the other shooting a casual half peace.

“Hi, amigos,” I say in my best-worst Mex-Tex accent. “All three-hundred-thousand bounty hunters in the star system. How y’all doing?”

“And now it’s time for Big Shot. The show that tells all about fugitives,” Avery says in a high pitched, overly girlish voice.

It is all Mitchell can do to not roll off the hill laughing.

“Shucks, howdy!”

I sound terrible, and because I sound terrible, I have never seen Mitchell laugh this hard. His Popeye arms wrap around his barrel chest, and he keels over with laughter, the sound loud and booming, the sound of something that has been held in for a long, long time.

I’m having fun. For the first time in what seems like forever, I’m really, one-hundred-percent, having fun. I’ve been so caught up in earning the money—all of which I still don’t have, still need to figure out how to obtain—that I haven’t had a chance to goof off. To not think about anything important.

“You and Avery will make a great Punch and Judy,” Maes says.

Punch and Judy host *Big Shots*, a television show that airs on *Cowboy Bebop*. Spike, Faye, Ed, and Jet are all bounty hunters, and they can often be seen listening to the daily bounty list that Punch and Judy broadcast.

And I say, “I love Big Shot. It was one of my favorite parts in *Cowboy Bebop*.”

And Avery says, “I cried when it was over. When the last episode of *Big Shot* aired, I cried and cried. I didn’t want the bounties to stop coming cause I thought that if they didn’t, it meant *Bebop* would go on forever and forever. Spike and Faye and Jet and Ed and Ein would all live happily ever after together.”

I stretch back on the grass. The sky is the bluest it's ever been. There's a cloud that's shaped like a koi fish. It swims across the left side of my brain. Through my side eye, I see Maes staring at the same space. I wonder what the wisp of air shapes into for her. A cloud? A cowboy?

"We could be alchemists," Avery says to no one. "Avery could be Hawkeye* or Winry*."

Winry and Hawkeye aren't alchemists, but no one corrects her. Winry's a mechanic and Hawkeye's a member of the Amerstrian military.

"Mitchell would make a good Louis Armstrong."

"The Cullman store has been in his family for generations," I say, emphatically, in the best Armstrong voice I can manage, the Armstrongs being a near royal family in *Full Metal Alchemist*. Louis Armstrong is built like one of the strongmen from a circus. He's a friendly guy despite his size and his strength.

Mitchell surprises me by agreeing. "Link's Scar, then."

"Because I'm brown?"

"Of course," he says. "But also, you probably wouldn't fuck it up too bad."

I don't say anything, because I think this is his way of complimenting me.

"We know who Maes will be," Avery says. She grins at Maes.

In *Full Metal Alchemist*, there's a character named Maes Hughes, a state alchemist with an incredibly big heart. Hughes is the kind of man who dotes on his wife and daughter and then suffocates his friends with his remaining affection. Maes Hughes is not our Maes's favorite character.

Roy Mustang is.

Roy Mustang is Maes Hughes's best friend. He's the one who watches after Hughes, he's the one who Hughes watches after. But in the minds of fangirls, Maes and Roy are more than

best friends; they're gay lovers. Our Maes, unable to cope with the pressure of being called Roy, the character she loves the most, happily accepts the name of his would-be lover. It suits her better, anyway. They're both pragmatists. Leaders.

I was the one who named her Maes. Before me, there was only Clover. But after me, long after me, when scientists in the future dig through all the things we've left behind, there'll only be Maes. Clover is gone, or rather, Clover has been consumed. What's left is our Maes, our always right.

"I'm happy with that." Maes rests her hands behind her head, elbows extended like the wings of a bow. "Call me Roy."

"And Louis," Mitchell says.

"And Hawkeye!"

"And Scar." Scar has a large tattoo etched on his right arm. The tattoo, a gift from his brother, a curse from his brother, has the power to deconstruct alchemy. It creates a nothing out of something. But more importantly, it tells the tale of the Ishvalans*, Scar's people, persecuted by the West, the blond-haired Amestrians* who, in the year 1909, extinguished the red-eyed Ishvalans, killing their culture, killing their people, killing their gods. There's power in Scar, the power to carry on for the few people he has left. I clench my fist. I need power to be there too.

*

The end of March is upon us. Mitchell continues to tutor Avery. He surprises her with flashcards—¿Cómo estás hoy, Avery? Estoy bien. Wonderful. ¿Qué tiene para comer?—and rewards her with Strawberry Pocky when she gets something right. Maes and I borrow four thick cuts of charcoal paper from the art room, create a large harisen out of it, and give it to Mitchell as

a joke. Mitchell uses it to hit Avery with when she answers incorrectly. I think they both enjoy this.

I show up in the art room less and less often. My after-school days are spent, mostly, at The Guitar Shop, wiping counters, helping beginners decide whether or not to go with an acoustic or an electric (go with the acoustic), studying for tests, and talking to my boss.

“When I saw that, I nearly lost it!” Myrtle yells to me.

I walk the floor with a vacuum, suck up lint, chipped fingernails, dirt from the green carpet.

“That’s why I stopped watching that shit. If you’re going to clog up a show with fillers, I don’t see the point in watching it.”

Somehow, we’re talking about *Inu Yasha*, the show about a modern era high school girl getting spirited to feudal Japan, only to discover she’s the reincarnation of a priestess. Myrtle, forty and unmarried and running a guitar shop and owning a pet snake and in between boyfriends, read *Inu Yasha* back when it was first released in Japan. Well, *read* is too much credit. She read the pictures. See, right after college, Myrtle had this pen pal, this Japanese guy named Hiroshi, who sent her Japanese things in return for American things. When *Inu Yasha* aired on Adult Swim a few years ago, a couple years after the Hiroshi letters, Myrtle watched it—and understood it—for the first time.

“And her voice? Like somebody playing high E for the first time.” Myrtle sits, and I can tell she wants a cigarette, because her cigarette hand is held out in front of her, dangling invisible cancer. Or maybe she wants to play.

“Welcome,” I say, to the sound of the bell ringing. I shut off the vacuum and push it behind the counter to give the customer room.

The customer, holding a guitar case, nods hello and studies the wall of strings, chords, and amps lined up in the corner, perpendicular to the wall of guitars in the back. I was the one who organized it that way, the one who—after only three days working here—couldn't take the old organizational system which was, if I'm being honest, shit thrown wherever. But not me, not me. I've got guitars lined up by maker, year, and price, so that a high quality Les Paul never gets to know a starter acoustic. I've got my amps segregated by power, by picks separated by thickness, my song books organized by difficulty.

I watch the customer's back. From behind, I can still see the guitar case jutting out of his arms. He's got his fingers curled around it, like the body of a woman he loves. He moves his head from left to right, then up to down, going over every inch of the wall, and I know, way before he comes to speak to us, that he's here to sell his guitar. I've seen this dance a thousand times—the holding, the reluctance in the tension of the fingers, the idling. Maybe he recently got an upgrade or maybe he's about to buy one or maybe, maybe he can't afford the car note for the third month in the row and his girlfriend of three years—of three years, two bands that didn't make it, hundreds of bloody calluses—has told him to either shape up or ship the hell out and now, at the age of twenty-eight or thirty-four he's decided that almost famous isn't good enough, that it's time to let the music go.

He comes over to us and I can almost hear the sound of the invisible ball-and-chain attached to his ankle, dragging on the floor. Myrtle sits up for this one, pulls on her Ben Franklin glasses. She doesn't speak to him immediately but motions for him to come around the register and over to a small table, covered in two inches of foam with a quarter-inch cotton sheet on top of it. The customer obliges.

“Well,” Myrtle says, “what do we got here?”

The customer lays the guitar on the table, the same way he's done his girlfriend of three years. He unhitches the latches and carefully pulls back the cover.

He's got the shakes. He says, with a warble to his voice, "Fender."

That's all I hear of it.

Fender Mustang, 1965. Olympic white body with a spackled Dakota red inlay, maple grained neck. Chrome hardware—from the nuts to the bridge—and a twenty-four-inch scale with double cuts. The guitar of my wet dreams.

This is one of the guitars used by Yoshiaki Manabe* of the pillows. This is the guitar of my boyhood—"Little Busters," "Hybrid Rainbow," "Ride on Shooting Star," "Another Morning." So much distortion. So many riffs, so much buzz. This is my space rock and my beginning. This is years spent up late watching *Cowboy Bebop* on repeat. This is years spent listening to the pillows soundtracks. I might cry. I might actually cry. This is a sign.

"Go ahead. Take it out."

The customer does as he's told. He lifts up his guitar the same way Mufasa, standing on the edge of pride rock, lifts Simba—something to be beheld, something to marvel at.

Whether a guitar's a classic, whether it was made in the forties or the eighties, all that matters is that somebody, somewhere loves it. That there's been time spent with it. That somebody visions about it. I move the case for the customer, and he lays the guitar back onto the covered table.

"What are we looking at today? What can I do for you?"

He puts one hand to his head and speaks. "I need to sell it. How much can I get for it?"

"That'll be determined," Myrtle says. "Do I have your permission to touch her?" We have a rule here; we don't touch anything without permission.

The customer nods then speaks. “Yeah. Yeah.”

Myrtle likes to talk while she works. She’s said, more than once, that it puts the customers at ease, reminds them that she’s done it a thousand times over. She speaks, the same way a doctor does when he has you sitting up on a table, sticking out your tongue with an *ahh*.

“Where’d you get her?”

“Belonged to my uncle.” He watches every move Myrtle makes.

Myrtle points at a scratch near the bottom of the body. I nod; I know she’s pointing it out for me to see.

“Why aren’t you selling it on eBay?” This question always kills me, but Myrtle almost always asks it. She’s a businesswoman second and a guitarist first.

“I need the cash fast.” He touches the body, the neck. He moves his fingers to his mouth, like he might throw up a lifetime worth of lunches.

“You don’t really want to sell it, do you?” Myrtle examines the back, checks it for scratches, cracks.

“Don’t have a choice.”

“Play me something,” Myrtle says to him.

He hesitates. He goes owl-eyed at Myrtle. He shakes it off and stretches each of his fingers, like I do before every session. He works the fat of his right palm, pushing the skin up, rubbing it with the pad of his thumb. He moves his fingers in a circle, massaging out the tension. When he’s done with that, he moves onto his index, then on and on, Myrtle and I watching patiently, giving him time to work out the stress. He picks up his guitar, nearly kisses it.

Since he hasn't brought an amp with him, I pull one from the back, one of the models we put aside for such an occasion. He gets himself set up, fingers slowly coming under his controls, jitters slowly evaporating.

He eyes Myrtle's stool and Myrtle gives him a silent nod. He takes his seat and readies himself.

Myrtle pulls off her glasses. She claims she can hear better when one of her other senses is dulled. She eats to smell, is blind to hear.

Most people play a couple stray chords when they're in this unfortunate position. But this man here must have had some kind of day because he decides to play "Stairway to Heaven" in its entirety, complete with a heavily improvised middle that deadens the sound to something way mellower than was intended. I give him zero points for originality—who doesn't want to play "Stairway"—but at least a seven for effort and for not bursting into song and ruining the sound quality. When he's finished—eight minutes later, and I swear we could have flown to Heaven and back by now—he replaces the guitar.

"Tell you what," Myrtle says, "I like this guitar. And I think Link does, too."

If I nod any harder, my head will fall off. I'm giving the guy a hard time, but only because I know what I could do with this machine. I could write the perfect song for Go, something that would knock him from his chair. Something that would make my dreams come true.

"But I don't think you really want to give it up. What I'm going to do is, I'm going to borrow it. I'll take it for nine, nothing more, and before you say it's worth any more than that, listen to what I'm going to say first." She shoos him off of her stool and sits. I hand her a pen and paper.

“I’m going to rent it. I promise not to sell it for.” She stops speaking and thinks. She appraises our customer, like she’s done with hundreds of other customers—dirty blue jeans but a clean blue shirt, hair unwashed but face shaven. She starts back up. “Six weeks from today. You can buy it back for one grand and some change.” May fourteenth.

“I’m pawning it?”

“Do I look like a pawn store to you?” She holds her hands up and over her head. The customer shakes his head no, quickly. “I’m doing you a favor. A pawn shop wouldn’t cut you this kind of deal. But I’m a nice lady. Well?”

The customer thinks it over. His eyes shoot from Myrtle to the guitar to Myrtle again. He holds out his hand. “Deal.” Their calluses touch. I ring him up at the cash register.

When he leaves, he won’t stop peeking back at us. Are these two all right? Did I do a good thing here? Will I ever see her again? Myrtle and I are side by side and we put on our best faces. I feel like a groom bidding good-bye to his father-in-law. As if I am about to *ravish* this guitar. I try not smile too hard.

The customer leaves and I glance at Myrtle and then at our newest addition. I know two things immediately: Myrtle is too kind, and I want that guitar.

I want it bad.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I master Aya Hirano's "God Knows" from episode thirteen of *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*. Haruhi does the vocals and plays lead guitar in the episode where she sings this song. Aya Hirano's voice is powerful, brash even, and I figure if I can learn the song by heart—if I can learn it well enough to play without the tabs—then I can convince Maes to sing it for me. This is still miles away from where I want to be—from where I want Maes and me to be—but I figure confidence is the first step in being able to play for a crowd of people.

My hands feel swollen. I sit back in a kitchen chair and dip my fingers in apple cider vinegar. It's six o'clock in the morning on a Monday and I know I should be using this time to study for my British Literature test, but right now my only question about Mary Shelly is whether she ever considered if Frankenstein's monster could jam.

Still, *Frankenstein* is bent open on my lap. I dip my hands farther into the vinegar and sigh.

Percy saunters in, dressed in a purple button up and khakis, face freshly shaven, hair edged up. He stayed over last night, like he sometimes does when Mom and Dad are both working late and leaving early. He opens the fridge and rummages, pulls out a box of Captain D's.

"Yours?" He grabs a bottle of tartar and a bottle of cocktail sauce out of the fridge.

I nod. Percy can have all my food, so long as we're AX bound.

"I'm eating it." He opens the microwave, rips off the top half of the box, and places the rest inside. He nukes it, and I consider telling him that heating up Styrofoam containers releases carcinogens into the food, but I don't. I don't understand the Irishman.

He pulls out a plastic fork and knife from one of the cabinet drawers. When two minutes are up, he sits down in front of me, condiments and utensils and food ready. He cuts into my fish. I smell the oil and the fish batter.

I watch his hands. Golden brown. He picks up one of my fries and eats it.

“How much money you saved up?”

“A lot.”

“A lot and a quarter will buy a Popsicle. We good? On that other thing, I mean.”

“Yeah,” I say. He’s asking about my stability, but I answer about the money. I’m doing fine. I’ve got periods of clarity and periods of cacophony, but that’s not something he needs to know. The money jar is nowhere near capacity. Maes and Avery have already stuffed their twenty-four-hundred worth, but Mitchell and I have barely pushed it past the thirty-five-hundred mark, and most of that money’s from Mitchell. I can’t tell Percy this.

He doesn’t press me and I don’t offer a follow-up. The buzz I was feeling over mastering “God Knows” has fizzled in my brother’s presence, and when Byron falls into the kitchen, bag ready, teeth brushed, I pull my hands from the apple cider, pour it into the sink, and head out. It isn’t until we make it to the front door that Byron asks me about breakfast.

I tell him, begrudgingly, that we’ll have to stop at Mickey D’s.

*

Our teachers are against us. I think they’ve banded together. We all have tests—Avery, Maes, Mitchell, and I—rows upon rows of final tests before our actual finals, nearly a month away. The four of us decide it’s best to skip our art room meetings for now. Maes and I talk pre-calculus in the hall and Mitchell and Avery can be seen, every now and then, wandering together, holding notecards, speaking in Spanish whispers. Maes doesn’t have a comment for

that. Neither do I.

We continue like this for a week. I go to school, take a test, go to The Guitar Shop and stare, lovingly, at the beautiful Fender Mustang, who I call Alisa. She stares at me with sparkling eyes and I stare back and for a moment, I feel bad, like I'm cheating on Shanti and Castro all at once and it's all I can do not to blush in their presences.

I spend my early mornings playing songs—Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" and L'arc~en~Ciel's "Lost Heaven." I watch a few episodes of *Dragon Ball Z*, my go-to show for sleepless nights, of which there are many. By the end of the week, Maes sends me a text message asking for a group meet-up.

I tell her okay.

*

The sweet, syrupy scent of kettle corn hits before I'm anywhere near close enough to hear it cracking in the cast-iron boiler the old man and his wife bring to the Magic City Art Connection every three years. The festival, a yearly event held in downtown, stretches across Linn Park, right up to the Court House, across the street from the Birmingham Museum of Art, means to showcase local artists. The section up front, left of the fountain, is where they hold the Imagination Festival, the spot where kids Byron's age and younger wander off to paint and draw and build. There's a musical stage filled with dancers—African, Asian, European—and mobile-making and water-coloring and boxes and boxes of pizza.

Everything else is for the adults—white tents housing copper presses of koi fish, paintings of giants roaming through landscapes, tie-dye shirts, airplanes made from beer bottles, wooden wine blocks. The whole park is lined with these tents stapled to the green grass, freshly mown, the smell of the homeless masked by perfume, paint, popcorn.

I started going to the festival when I was eight, when I was in elementary and enrolled in art, when my school decided it'd be a nice idea to give us the day off; to give us a day to roam around a park we wouldn't normally have the chance to go to. I liked going every year. I never had any artistic designs—my drawings always seemed as if they were done by an eight-year-old, even as I got to be nine, ten, eleven—but I enjoyed making them anyway.

Maes uses her hand as a visor to block out the sun. She's dressed like a farmer, standing in front of me, her hair in one long braid, pulled over her left shoulder. She's got on cut-off overalls and a plaid shirt. Only her feet bring me back. The Keds she wears are classic, the kind my brother handed down to me, the kind that you could pump up like an ego. Comfortably nineties. Even in this sun, she's pale as a winter sky.

I stand next to her and peek at what she's eyeing: it's Wonder Woman in blue and red, done with spray paint, sealed with resin, the artist card tells me. Fifty dollars. She bites her plump, plum lips and moves in closer.

I know she's got a thing for superheroes in disguise. She won't say it, but Poison Ivy, Harley Quinn, Wonder Woman, they all do for her what Faye Valentine does for me. She tries to hide it—she says, again and again, how she likes historical manga or eighties and nineties manga. And it's true, it's all true, she'll go crazy for *Marmalade Boy*, can't read enough of *Fushigi Yugi* and *Red River*. But every once in a while someone will talk about the latest superhero movie—*Batman*, *The Avengers*, whatever—and she'll scoff, a true to life scoff, because she knows the truth; she's keeping up with the comics. She knows her superheroes. She reaches out and motions toward Wonder Woman, sealed off by a hard frost, frozen with power.

I follow Maes to another numbered booth, careful not to be hit by the giant bag she's now gently swinging, Wonder Woman wrapped in tissue paper. I shake my head; fifty dollars. If I had

fifty doors to spend it wouldn't be on Wonder Woman.

“Where are they?” I ask. I stick my hands in my pockets. I don't want them to feel so empty. We're in what I like to think is the off-center of the park, the spot where the fountain blooms on a platform, elevated. I'm slapped with a hit of vanilla—some kid with an ice cream cone big as his hand. I glance in his direction, and his mother—tall and blonde—adjusts the cone in his hand as he smiles at me.

“Come on.” Maes leads me down the steps, off toward the side closest to City Hall. We try to avoid bumping into people—clumps of middle school kids, couples holding hands. We pass a booth that sells paintings of guitars, and I want to tell Maes to stop, but I don't when I see what's in front of me.

Mitchell Harris is holding a baby. Well, a toddler, sandy-haired and freckled. A woman, short and long-haired, one arm on her hip and the other under her chin, stands in front of Mitchell, talking. They're standing underneath a tent.

“Don't be like that, Mitch. She came to see you,” the woman says. She moves her hands now. She twists at her skirt, tries to line it up the right way.

“Never said I wasn't grateful,” Mitchell says. He stares at the woman, no kind of expression on his face, then back at the toddler with the beginnings of a smile.

The toddler beams at him, the way that kids do. He wraps one arm around Mitchell's neck and uses the other to fly an aluminum airplane.

“Then act like it.” The girl's wearing her skirt right again, wearing her frown better. She's not a big woman, but you can see the roundness, the extra pounds the toddler's probably given her.

“You tell Daniel and her to come by.” Mitchell stares right at me, like he's been talking to

me this whole time, like Maes' and my appearance was planned. He stands the toddler on his feet and hushes him when he whines.

Maes and I walk closer to Mitchell and the woman, our cover blown.

The woman looks at us, then at Mitchell. We're all thinking the same thing: *how'd this happen?*

"Hi!" the toddler says. He grins at me and Maes and I notice, for the first time, that he's got sticky pink gunk on his mouth, some dessert residue.

"Hey," Maes says. She squats down to his level. He hands her his aluminum airplane without any fuss. "Now this is cool." She flies it over his head and he watches, wonderstruck, I imagine, at the way the silver catches the light.

The woman turns toward me.

"Lincoln and Maes." It's Mitchell.

Never, in my most terrifying of dreams—not even the one I have, repeatedly, of falling off the Bell South building and landing, feet first, on an empty stage surrounded by millions and billions of unsmiling people—could I have, would I have, should I have imagined that Mitchell Harris would ever introduce me to anyone.

I nod at the woman.

"Hi," she says. "I guess I'll introduce myself since Mitchell's not going to. I'm Tabby, his sister." She squats down beside the boy and runs a hand through his hair. "And this is Jake."

I remember a phone conversation from way back when. Mitchell said Tabby, not tabs.

"Hi Jake," Maes says.

"Hi!" Jake says again. I think he might be sweet on Maes.

Tabby stands up, lifting Jake along with her. Maes follows her example and hands the

airplane back to Jake.

“Thanks for letting me play with it.”

“Thank you!”

“We’re going now. Mitch, I’ll call you, see if Mom and Daniel still want to come around. It’s up to you though.”

Mitchell grunts in return, seems to think about it, and says okay.

His sister nods a sharp *bye* to us and heads off.

Mitchell moves his hands to his back, stretches, and sighs at the sound of a sharp crack. He moves between me and Maes, to the front of his tent, and removes a sign that says “OUT TO LUNCH.” He goes toward the back of his booth and leans against a table.

“Your nephew’s really cute.”

Mitchell folds his arms. “Thank you.”

I know something’s up. I know something weird is happening with his sister.

Maes strolls around the tent and touches everything inside. It’s Sloss Furnace’s booth, not Mitchell’s, although Mitchell is the one manning it at this hour. There are iron castings of starfish, big as both of our fists. There are castings of faces, of welcome signs, of birds. Maes turns and takes the short walk to the opposite side. She stops, smiles.

I browse with her. It’s Mitchell’s work. Tiny, iron robots. Gundam-like, Transformers-like. The kind of robots our parents saw in their childhoods; blocky and clumsy. Likeable. There are robots in tutus, robots in hats, robots holding out fishing rods over a gray, iron pond. They’re a beautiful thing to see. It’s the side of Mitchell I don’t want to admit exists.

“These are nice.” I can’t stop myself.

Mitchell’s wearing short sleeves today, too hot for his trademark Tide sweatshirt. His

hands are callused, a deeper red than the rest of his body. It's from the fire, I know. From the iron pouring. He once told us that temperatures can soar as high as two-thousand, three-hundred degrees, that if you're not careful, if you lean in too far, if you pour without the equipment, your skin, often hard and rough from dry Alabama summers, can become a liquid, burning to the touch, on fire. Skin melts at one hundred and sixty-two degrees.

I stare at my hand, proud of my own calluses. They're not marks of disfigurement, but marks of steadiness, of hard work. The first year after I began playing guitar, my fingers peeled and cracked and ached. Slices of skin would blow in the breeze; the edges of my fingers bled red rivers. Now, my hands are used to the pressure of holding down a note, of playing for hours and hours until I live as a sound. I think Mitchell gets some of that. He gets that clean hands aren't something to be proud of.

"How much for this one?" I ask. I pick up a square, boxy robot, the kind you'd see in the seventies, the kind I know Dad would love. I feel like I owe him something for not throwing me under the bus like Mom's doing. For knowing I'm an idiot but letting me dream anyway.

"Four hundred."

"Fuck you."

"Keep it."

Maes and I both stare at Mitchell. We're so in-sync that we might have been twins in a former life, sharing the same warm womb.

"Not 'cause I like you," he says. He goes toward the front of the tent as a group of five approaches. "Cause you need to save all your money for AX."

I pick up the robot, head to the back table, to the cash register, and slip twenty dollars under the drawer pan.

For a moment, we only dislike each other.

Mitchell manages to sell one iron cow, one iron face mask, two iron robots—not counting the one I bought—and five iron kittens, big as wall clocks. Maes and I can hardly believe how much traffic's picked up, a steady flow of curious onlookers, old white women wearing floppy hats to block out the sun, two gay guys, holding hands and trying to decide between an iron Dalmatian and an iron cat.

After a while, about twenty minutes into the comers and goers, a mother—a mother, I can tell—and her husband, walk into the tent, and without Mitchell saying anything and without me even watching him, I know it's Mitchell's mother.

She's shaped like Olive Oyl with hair like spaghetti. She's got bangs coming halfway down between her forehead and brows. Her eyes are hazel, brighter than Mitchell's, and close together over a long, skinny nose.

The husband, dark haired, tanned—not a rich people's tan, nice and even, but a poor man's tan, caught from yard work, possibly work-work—is not much height-wise, but has a slow and easy stride.

Mitchell says to the husband, "Hey." He nods to his mother.

Maes grabs onto my arm. She goes for the elbow, curls her fingers around the angle of my joints. She pulls me out, and because the tent's still got four other customers, the mother and the husband don't mind us; they don't mind us at all.

Maes leads me away from the tent, back toward 7th Avenue. She gets a good four booths away before she offers an explanation. "This is about to get weird."

I scratch my forehead. "What makes you think that?" I have my suspicions. I crouch down beside a tent selling Chinese paintings. Maes crouches with me.

“Is that how you greet *your* mother?”

My mother would pop me in the mouth before she’d let me be that rude to her, and I have a feeling that Mitchell’s about two seconds away from a similar backhand.

From where we are, we can’t hear what they’re saying. Mitchell’s mother’s doing most of the talking though and from her body language—the way she’s got her head turned up toward Mitchell and legs positioned in a cowboy’s stances, spread shoulder length apart—I know Mitchell’s in trouble. The husband steps forward with one hand raised and I can almost read his lips—*wait a second*—but then Mitchell’s mom takes one step forward and wraps her hand around the side of Mitchell’s head. She grips and pulls Mitchell’s head down so he’s to her level.

Maes’s grips the inside of my elbow. Her fingers feel soft and warm against my skin. The touch feels lighter than before; it lingers.

“Maes?”

“Is he going to be okay?”

His mother’s saying something to him. Her lips move in a whisper. There are no others in the tent. It’s just the Harris Family, a kind of scary quiet circling around them.

She lets go of my elbow. I stand and she stands and together we head toward the back booths, all the while glancing back until the tent can’t be seen.

“It’s none of our business,” I say after a while.

“I know,” says Maes. She watches her feet. “But I’m curious all the same.”

We aren’t far from the concession stands. There’s the sweet scent of kettle corn, and a smokiness rising from the grilled chicken gyros; there’s the smell of grease and salt curling around a batch of ring fries. There’s music, the sound of someone playing blues, a lilting tune. I close my eyes. I hear the belly of the acoustic. I open my eyes. It’s one man, one old man, sitting

on a center stage, playing some old song that's probably been with him so long it seems like a brother, like a cousin, like a soul mate.

I feel arms around my waist. I yank the arms away from me and turn. Avery grins at me, then runs to hide behind Maes. She shoves her hands into Maes's pockets. She pouts.

"Link-kun and Maes are bullies," she says, in a huff. "Avery has waited all day to see you, and neither has come by my booth." She wiggles her fingers.

"Shouldn't you be manning that booth?" The song is coming to a close, turning into another one. I'm glad to see Avery. She's a mood changer.

"Avery is on break." She snuggles against Maes's back.

Maes shifts, switches the pressure from one leg to the other. She turns her head to see Avery. "We got a little sidetracked. I hope that's okay."

There are moments, brief as childhood, when Maes talks with the same voice she sings in. Husky, low. Something that goes right to my center. Avery shivers. I shiver.

"Well," Avery says, "Okay. Avery is hungry now. Let's eat!"

Maes hesitates. "What about Mitchell?"

"Mitcchan would not taste good."

"Avery," Maes says, but there's nothing behind it. She's smiling, probably despite herself. "Shouldn't we wait for him?"

"But Avery is hungry now." She stamps her feet a little, her toes, painted a sunshine kind of yellow, peeking from her orange sandals. Her eyes are a bit heavy, downward sloping, like she's pulled an all-nighter. She's wearing orange shorts and a yellow tank top. A black bra strap slides down one shoulder, and she has to remove one of her hands from Maes's pocket in order to slide it back up.

“Eyes up here, Lincoln,” Maes says to me.

“I wasn’t.”

Avery gasps, places both hands over her mouth. “Link-kun is a pervert.”

I turn away from them and head toward the concessions. It doesn’t take long for both of them, laughing, to follow.

*

Avery tears into a turkey leg like it’s corn on the cob. She holds the leg by either side, tilts her head to the left, and gnaws. Juice drips down her chin and onto her neck where, with the same force you’d use to swat a fly, she slaps it away with her hand. Behind her, rows of concessions line 7th Avenue—vendors selling gyros, curly fries, kettle corn, corndogs, cotton candy, ice cream, chicken on a stick, lemonade, beer, sweet tea. A man and a woman stand in front of a portable ATM machine that’s been set up around the concessions, and a couple of kids wander past Renaissance Bank.

Maes half-eats her meatless gyro—onions, bell peppers, lettuce—and half-watches Avery, waiting, I think, for the juice to be too quick to swat. For when the drippings will fall onto that yellow tank Avery’s breasts are stretching to capacity.

Her feet shuffle under the white plastic table we sit at.

Somebody else is up on stage now, a white guy with curly brown hair, cradling an acoustic, and a black guy, bearded, on keys, giving his fingers a workout. The white guy croons; the black guy speaks easy.

“You know them?”

I shake my head no. I squint until I can read the sign posted near the stage. “Blue Crow.” I bite my corndog, dipped into ketchup and mustard. It’s hot and smoky on my tongue, but when

I shut my eyes, I'm reminded of being seven, of when Mom used to fix us sausage and pancake on a stick for Saturday breakfast.

“Avery thinks that we should dance.”

I shake my head no, then open my eyes.

Avery frowns at me and Maes, but Maes, cool as Spike Spiegel, speaks. “Weren't you going to show us your booth?”

Avery grins at Maes, a string of turkey stuck in her teeth. “Maes always knows exactly what to say.”

We finish up our meals, and while Maes and Avery throw away their trash, I stand in line for two bags of kettle corn, hand already gripping a ten-dollar bill. When the corn's bought and our table's all cleaned up and occupied by some other people, we head back toward the direction of the fountain, taking the side road instead of heading for the center platform.

Avery is stationed near what I call the front of the park, back where there's a paved walkway filled with little pools of water that lead up to the fountain. Avery bounces over to her booth and holds her hands up in front of it, Vanna White style.

It's us. It's all us, even the part of it that isn't us. What I mean to say is that Avery has painted huge, four-by-five-foot watercolor and marker paintings of us, done in the same soft ukiyo-e like style as the manga she draws. It's Mitchell, wearing his red Alabama hoodie, sitting on a stool in the art room, planked by two empty art tables, head down and reading a manga. It's Maes sitting cross-legged on the stairs that lead up to our school, her mouth open, her eyes closed, soundless but singing while I, standing tall, holding an acoustic—it's drawn right, right down to the knick near the bridge where I, excited and trying to restring my guitar for the first time, popped the string too hard and dropped the wire cutters—play a song. Everything is Easter-

colored—eggshell whites, dusty blues, just-birthered rose.

Maes hugs Avery. Tight around her shoulders and arms and back all at once. A hold that means something. Avery snuggles her face in Maes's hair. She moves her arms around Maes's shoulders and closes her eyes.

So this is what Avery was doing while Mitchell and I worked. She was creating masterpieces.

Behind me, I hear a voice say, "Beautiful."

I turn around and there she stands—my Shanti, in a white tank and blue shorts, her golden-brown hair surrounding her like a mane. She smiles at me, her pink lips parting, and it takes me longer than it should to acknowledge her.

Avery lets go of Maes. She beams at Shanti. "Thank you. Welcome!"

Shanti waves at Avery, and at Maes, who waves back then tightens the end of her braid. Shanti walks over to the painting of Maes and me on the steps. She reaches out, as if to touch it, but draws her hand back.

"It's Clover and Link, right?"

Avery stares at her for a moment, then smacks her right hand into her left. "Yes!"

"It's okay to call me Maes," Maes says.

Shanti touches the painting, lightly. "Is it?"

"I promise."

Mary Elizabeth steps in, fanning herself with a Chinese fan, holding a bottle of water in her other hand. Her skin is pink and her hair its usual burning-ember-orange. She nods a hello to everyone and loops her arm through Shanti's.

"Found you." Mary Elizabeth wrinkles her nose at Shanti, then takes in the paintings for

the first time. “This is great.”

Avery grins, covers her mouth with her hands. Maes removes the gone-to-lunch sign from the front of the tent.

“Have you gone around yet?” Maes asks Shanti and Mary Elizabeth.

“A little,” Shanti says. “We got here late. I did see this cool Chinese art booth.”

Maes rejoins me, then elbows me, discreetly, in the side. “Link loved that booth.”

I make a silent promise to buy Maes a bag of kettle corn before we leave. “Yeah.” I’ve never seen that booth.

“Cool.” Shanti smiles at me.

“Wow.” Mary Elizabeth touches a portrait of Maes, sleeping, her hair falling off to one side, the tips of the strands held together by a pink rose. Maes’s mouth is a soft “O,” her hands are folded beneath her chin and her elbows fly from the desk.

Mary Elizabeth looks at Maes. “Beautiful.”

“It’s my favorite of Maes!” Avery shouts.

Maes shakes her head. “We really should bring Mitchell to see this.”

Avery scoffs. “Avery can’t leave again, she has to watch her booth!” She grabs me by the arm and squeezes. “Let Avery call someone first!”

Shanti glances in our direction and I yank my arm away and step back. “Fine.”

“We’ll be going then,” Mary Elizabeth says. She re-loops her arm through Shanti’s, then waves at us. “Great work, Avery.”

Avery curtsies, and the three of us watch as my future wife and wife’s best friend wander into a passing crowd.

Maes pinches Avery’s arm and Avery yelps as Maes whispers, “Don’t cling onto Link

when Shanti's around."

Avery nods, sullenly, and pulls out her phone to make a call. She falls into the folding chair behind her cash register.

"You don't have to do that," I say to Maes. I stand beside her. I want to be sad that Shanti's gone, but when I focus, I see a painting of Mitchell and me, seated at the lunch table. Avery has never seen us eat before—at least, I don't think she has—but the atmosphere is so right that I'm having my doubts. Mitchell is turned from me, shoveling food and I sit, notebook out, pencil held, scribing. Homework? A song? I'm not sure. But what I am sure of, what's most alarming is that even though our bodies point in opposite directions—even though we don't appear to talk or interact—there's still something there that says I know this guy and he knows me. Something that says our sitting together is no accident, but a force of the cosmos greater than if not equal to Goku and Vegeta, constantly butting heads, constantly saving one another.

"I know I didn't have to." Maes tucks her hands into her pockets. She rocks forward on her feet, her Keds making squeaks on the grass. She stares at the painting Mary Elizabeth liked. "But I did."

"Yeah."

Maes turns to me and holds both hands near the side of her face, her fists balled. "Link-kun, fighting." She shakes her fists.

She never calls me Link-kun. It's always Link or Lincoln. And she never tells me fighting, the Korean phrase for "do your best" or "keep going." *Fighting*, she tells me. *Keep on*.

I lift one arm to the side toward her, fingers curled. She bumps her fist against mine.

*

Because Avery can't leave her booth for at least another thirty minutes, Maes and I

wander around nearby. We find the Chinese booth Maes lied about. We find a tent filled with paintings of dogs doing human things—brushing their teeth, eating cereal, paying taxes. Maes leads me into a tent that sells jewelry and she finds a stand full of rings made of keyboard letters and numbers. She buys an “M” for herself and an “A,” for Avery, and when I think I can’t take much more of this kind of shopping, she points to a row of multi-colored guitar picks, punched with a hole up top and dangling from a black leather necklace.

I go to the necklaces and notice that they’re printed with letters. I click through them: A, B, F, H, I, J, M, N, P, Q, S. I pick up the S and roll the necklace around in my palm. The pick’s coral colored and the S is a bright red. Maes stands beside me and peeks into my hands.

“You should buy it for her.”

“No,” I say, but I don’t put the necklace down. I try not to imagine the weight of the pick—a real pick, thick cut, 1 millimeter at least—stuck to Shanti’s chest.

“Listen to your friend,” the saleslady, who I assume is the artist, says, a curly, dark-haired woman wearing a bucket hat and khakis, fanning herself with cardstock. “Trust me, she’ll love it.”

It will touch her neck, her breasts. It will hang as proof of my devotion, and unlike the last time—unlike Valentine’s Day when I was too quiet and too shy to tell her what she already knows—I will be brave. I will wrap the necklace in a gold box and give it to her out in the school’s courtyard. I’ll bring Castro. I’ll strum her a song, the way they do on those Korean dramas Maes watches. Or no, something better. I’ll be like Koyuki from *Beck*. I’ll sing and I’ll play for her and it will all seem vivid and natural and perfect. She’ll brag of my talents. She’ll pursue me. If I am Koyuki she will be Izumi. So much better than me, but still in love,

“Buy it,” Maes says, “You can worry about giving it to her later.”

I can't remember if *Beck* ends well. I place the necklace back on its hanger and sprint from the tent. Maes laughs, but I keep going. I wait for her to purchase her items. I wait for bravery.

When Maes is done, we walk. We pass booths selling clothes, past booths selling birdhouses painted royal blue and Russian red. Kids run past us, holding balloons and snow cones, as their parents, tanned and tired, meander behind them, arms linked, feet hitting the grass at the exact same time. We pass a booth selling copper dishes and copper bowls and another booth selling tie-dye shirts and fringe vests. Up ahead, with blues music tumbling out between the sounds of people talking, people laughing, is a folk art booth selling bright paintings of times past.

We walk a little more. Far off, I spot Noah, but I don't make any effort to go talk to him. I see other people from school too, a girl who asks too many questions in history and another girl who's always standing up for the wrong people in government. She glances in my direction, and when she sees me she turns away. I want to ask Maes if she noticed that, but I shrug it off.

Maes gets a text from Avery telling us that she'll be another few minutes and to go on and meet with Mitchell, that she'll catch up to us then. Maes and I head back to Mitchell's booth, the sun moving slowly toward the west side of town.

Mitchell's mother is gone. But the man she was with, her husband, at least, is still here, shooting the breeze with Mitchell. He squeezes past three or four men and women trying to decide if they want a cat sculpture or a robot one.

"Hey," he says to us. "Mitch's friends, right? I'm Daniel." The second husband holds out his hand toward us, and Maes, unflinching, shakes it.

"I'm Maes." She releases his hand.

“Link,” I shake his hand, and I can feel them: calluses, big as quarters. I let go.

“Nice meeting you. You the ones going with Mitch on the trip, right?”

Maes and I say yes; Mitchell’s stepdad nods. Mitchell is away now, wrapping up an iron cat and an iron robot sitting over a pond.

“I’m impressed with how hard y’all are working. I hope you make it there.”

“Thanks,” Maes says. “We’re really looking forward to it.”

I shuffle my feet a little, grip the popcorn bags. Maes continues.

“We’re traveling far. It’s a little intimidating.”

“What’s the furthest you’ve been?”

“I’m from Korea,” Maes says.

It’s the first time I’ve ever heard her say anything like that. I’m *from* Korea. As if Maes had existed, even for a moment, anywhere else but here, in this city.

“Never been there.” He corrects his posture. “Did go to Vietnam. Army.”

Maes and I are both listening now, more intently than before. My grip on the bag loosens a bit.

“Saw the whole world through the Army. I’m from Arkansas, originally, but we moved to Alabama when I was round six, so I’m Alabamian through and through. Haven’t left the state since I finished my last tour. That was way before any of you.”

Maes smiles politely. She tucks a loose strand behind her ear. “You’re no more than forty.”

Daniel cracks up at this. He folds his arms across his chest, which seems to broaden with every word. “I think you and I are going to get along fine.”

Maes smiles, for real.

“Anyway,” Daniel says, laughter subsiding, “I’m real proud of Mitchell. He’s a real go-getter. He’s been working hard for this trip.”

Mitchell, hearing his name I figure, is on the fast approach. He has to squeeze his way past two teenagers holding an iron African mask.

“The only way I ever got out of here was through the Army. But here he is, seventeen, and already going clear ‘cross the world.”

“Quit that,” Mitchell says. He cheeks have taken on a faint orange; his ears are red.

I rethink Mitchell Harris. He’s a bigot jackass, but if this is the man that raised him—no, that’s not right. Mitchell’s real dad is in Cullman.—but if this is the man that’s with him now, that listens to him after school, that asks him about his day, then maybe there’s more to Old Mitch than I thought. Because this man in front of me, this Daniel, seems decent. I’m not getting bad vibes right off the bat, anyway. And good people do good, they do right by other people. Then maybe—maybe—he’s done right by Mitchell, too.

“I’m speaking the truth,” Mitchell’s stepdad says. “You’re a good kid.”

“Mitcchan is a great kid!” In bounces Avery, swinging a bag from her hand. She bounds over to us and stops in front of Daniel.

“This is Avery,” Mitchell kind of mutters.

“Hi, I’m Avery!” Avery all but shouts. She sticks out her hand like she’s going to give it away.

Mitchell’s stepdad shakes it, but glances at Mitchell before he addresses Avery. “Daniel Clay. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you.” Avery gives a little curtsy. She beams at Mitchell. “Is this your—”

Daniel cuts her off. “I’m his stepdad.”

Avery nods, like she expected this answer. She folds her arms and notices her surroundings for the first time. “Wow, Mitcchan’s booth is super cool.”

“It’s Sloss’s booth. I’m only watching it.”

Avery doesn’t respond to this. She finds Mitchell’s section of the booth and picks up a robot wearing a bow. “I like this one.”

Mitchell goes over to her and takes the robot from her. “You can shop in a bit.”

Daniel and Maes both glance back at Avery and Mitchell. Daniel, with something like pride, I think, and Maes, with something I don’t have a word for.

“I’ve got to be going now. It was nice meeting everybody.” He smiles at me and Maes and then Avery and Mitchell.

Mitchell hides his hands in his pockets. “Yeah. See you tonight.”

Daniel leaves and the booth, after a moment of activity, whittles down to the four of us. Avery goes back over to the robot table and picks up the bowed robot.

“Daniel seems nice,” Maes says. She watches Avery pick up an iron horse.

“Yeah.” I don’t mean to admit this, but I do. “Hey, let’s go check out Avery’s booth again. After that, I have one more booth I want to see.”

“Avery wants to buy the horse and the robot.” She’s back to second person. “Oh, and this welcome sign. Oh, and this starfish.”

“Mom’s pregnant,” Mitchell says.

I can hear the sound of kettle corn cracking way across the park. Maes’s shoes squeak.

“Let’s go see Avery’s booth.” He picks up his “OUT TO LUNCH” sign and places it back by the door even though it’s going on five o’clock.

Mitchell heads for the tent’s entrance, but Avery’s words stop him.

“Maybe Mitchan doesn’t like Daniel?”

Mitchell whips around to her. “Don’t ever say that.” He points at Avery. “Do not.”

Avery nods, silently. She puts down all of the iron sculptures she wants.

Mitchell walks over to the sculptures, picks them up, and puts them behind the counter.

He cuts past Avery and Maes and me and right out the door. We follow, quiet for a while, quiet for a long while, until Maes speaks up.

“I think you’ll be a good big brother.”

“Yes,” Avery says. “Yes.”

“You can teach him or her about anime.” It’s Maes again.

“*Battle Royale*,” Avery says.

Mitchell doesn’t say anything, but he pauses mid-step, only for a moment.

“I don’t think *Battle Royale* is the best choice. Not immediately,” Maes says.

“*The Haunting*.”

Maes shakes her head at me and Avery. “Maybe something more kid-friendly, like *Pokemon*.”

The three of us agree on *Pokemon*, but Mitchell never says a word. Somehow, without Avery leading, he finds her booth and wanders inside. We follow him, Cerberus-like.

Mitchell Harris stands in the middle of Avery McAllister’s booth. He puts his hands to his side, then on his back, as if he’s about to crack it. He looks in front of him, then up and around him. He goes from picture to picture, from three by four to five by six to sleeping Maes to reading Mitchell. He doesn’t turn around when he speaks.

“These are all nice,” he says. I hear him swallow. “But where are you, Avery?”

I don’t know why, but my chest tightens. Twenty plus paintings of Maes, Mitchell, and

me, but not a one of Avery. We all turn to her.

Avery shrugs. "I'm watching."

*

Maes wheels us away to Five Points South. Mitchell's shift manning the Sloss booth is over, and Avery has given herself a two-hour break. Maes parks us in the Golden Temple parking lot, and when I remind her that the city tows, she tells me that she is a regular here. We slide out of the car—Maes and I up front, Mitchell and Avery in the back—and set off.

Coming here was Maes's idea. She wanted a change of scenery—probably, I suspect, to get the image of Mitchell's mother out of her head—and said that Five Points was just the place.

I don't care for it. I don't like being downtown and I don't like Five Points. It's not Mountain Brook—a scary kind of beautiful—but it isn't home, either. Lush green trees spring up from the sidewalks and create canopies over the cars parked diagonally along the road. It's crowded here, this place where hipsters and businessmen converge, where bohemian meets wealth.

Avery links her arm through Maes's, and Mitchell and I hang back behind them. I get the idea that we'd both rather be somewhere else, but as usual, the girls have overruled us. Maes and Avery stop in front of Golden Temple, part hippie wonderland—selling herbs, spices, healing stones, cures—and part vegetarian restaurant. The Birmingham Festival Theater's connected to it—I've never been—and the Bail Bonds place is across the street—I've never been. I peek inside the restaurant part of Golden Temple. A guy with a beard long enough to hide secrets in digs into a sandwich. I mean, head down and bent over eating, like it's the best damn sandwich in the world.

Mitchell's phone buzzes. He has "Flying in the Sky," the opening song from *G Gundam*, as his ringtone. He pulls out his phone, checks the screen, then places the phone back into his pocket.

"What?" he asks me.

"Nothing." I eye his pocket.

"Mind your own."

So I mind my own. Mitchell's wound up and I guess I don't blame him. I'd be pretty pissed too if my mom decided to lay down the law in the middle of an art festival. Maes snaps at us, anyway.

"Don't start," she says. She glances over her shoulder and leads Avery away, past the dry cleaner. Mitchell and I follow. A Camaro rumbles past and another car backs into a parking space. Someone, on the other side of the street, shouts "Julianne!" and two women run up and hug each other in front of the Jim N Nick's. I don't know how Golden Temple, vegetarian as it is, stays in business when it has to compete with barbeque. I smell cheddar cheese biscuits and pulled pork, and I hunger for them even though I've already eaten.

"You can't be hungry," Maes says.

Avery follows my eyes. She points. "Surin West?" Surin West is right beside Jim N Nicks. It serves Indian food. Not my cup of tea.

I shake my head no. "You don't smell pulled pork?"

Mitchell inhales. His stomach growls. He *definitely* smells pulled pork.

"I prefer Surin," Maes says. "I love Thai."

So it's Thai, not Indian? "To each their own." I pocket my hands and push forward. When I look back, Maes and Avery have stopped yet again, this time looking into some kitschy shop

selling *I Love Lucy* paraphernalia.

Mitchell drags his hand down his face. “Jesus,” he says.

“Byron has a longer attention span,” I say.

“Byron?” Avery asks. I didn’t think she was paying attention. She holds her hands behind her back and gazes up at me, her long lashes fluttering.

“My little brother.”

She gasps. “Link-kun has a little brother? Is he cute? Does he look like Link-kun? Show me, show me, show me!” She flaps her arms and bounces on her toes. People are starting to notice in that politely Southern way—a glance and an awkward smile.

I take out my cell and find a picture of Byron before she takes flight. She peeks at the screen, squeals, and holds the phone to her chest. Maes looks over her shoulder; that’s no surprise. But what is a surprise is Mitchell. He peeks—discreetly—and I almost miss this. He stops when he catches me catch him.

It’s not like Mitchell to take an interest in my family. So I’m even more surprised when he asks, “How old is he?”

I take a moment to answer. “Eight. Why?”

“Jesus, I’m just asking.”

Maes walks between us. “Maybe,” she says, “Lincoln can give you some big brother tips. If you want them.”

Mitchell keeps his mouth shut. He folds his arms over his chest and turns the corner, past the Starbucks.

Maes smiles at me. “You should help him out. I don’t know what’s up with his family, but I’d imagine being a big brother is scary.”

I answer reflexively. “It’s not.” Byron’s a good kid. Sure, it’s kind of a pain waking him up every morning and helping him with his homework sometimes, but I’ve learned to accept those things. Our morning drive to school isn’t bad. And in my family of five he’s the only one that I think is really rooting for me. He’s the only one who says *when* I go to California, not *if*.

We follow Mitchell around the corner and I speak. I tell them everything. “He’s really good at soccer,” I say to Avery. I point to the picture. Byron’s dressed in his blue soccer uniform. He’s clutching a soccer ball with one hand and throwing up a peace sign with the other.

“Did you teach him the victory sign?” Maes asks.

“Of course. I’ve got this kid on *Dragon Ball Z* and a ton of other anime lined up when he finishes it.”

“Nailed it,” Maes says.

Mitchell walks in front of the three of us. He never looks back, not even when we pause to stare up at Highlands church. Homeless men gather around the goat fountain, and Avery and Maes stop stories of Byron to describe the architecture of the church. Terracotta roof, they say. Spanish Revival Style. I’m only partly listening. I’m watching Mitchell out of the corner of my eye. He’s got his cell phone in his hand.

I wonder, like I never have before, what the deal is with his family. Why his mother grabbed him so. Why he seemed closer to Daniel than to her.

We continue on, walking up and down Five Points. It’s the first time we’ve ever been like this—so out in public. I wonder how we look to other people. Do we seem like friends? Are we friends? We walk and walk until our legs get tired. Until it’s time for Avery and Mitchell to go back. We promise to meet up later. We decide that this day is ours.

*

You'd be surprised what you can get Mitchell Harris to admit to when he's been drinking. We sit around, holding cool plastic cups in our hands, kicking back in the rear of his pickup, waiting for Maes and Avery to show. Of course, I'm not actually in his pickup truck; we're not that chummy, can't be. But he sits on the edge and I lean against the side, and the two of us, enemies by birthright, stare up at all the stars stuck in the Alabama sky, caught like the dust of Kleenex.

"They divorced when I was ten. Was a while back now." Mitchell sips from his cup, five shades brighter and lighter than the Tide sweatshirt he wears.

"Don't tell me why. Nobody. Dad, my mom, Tabatha."

I know I should ask questions here, but I can't bring myself to ask Mitchell Harris much of anything. Any question I give him seems like a bit of defeat.

"My mom moves out here, Dad stays in Cullman. Tabatha was fourteen then, is twenty-one now. Married. Got a kid, you saw." He reaches into his pocket, pulls out a wallet and then a photo of the boy from the art festival. He's been burned in the summer sun—summer, because I see the receding line of the Gulf Coast, the glare of the white foam—but he seems happy.

Context tells me that he and Tabatha aren't on good terms. Not real hard to figure out; there's a reason the photo's been cut in half.

He stuffs his nephew back into his wallet, flips the leather closed, then puts the wallet back inside of his pocket. He takes a sip from his cup.

"I came down here cause of Dad. Said it might be nice to try to spend some time with Mom." He sips. "She's remarried now. To Daniel."

I think real hard about what Mitchell says. Remarried now. How long is now? What happened in between? Was he the reason she left in the first place?

“He’s all right by me. I like him.”

I roll my cup around in my palms. We’re parked at the school, even though it’s nighttime. White swarms of gnats hiss in the heat, and I imagine that they’re some gentler animal, fireflies buzzing and zinging their way down the road in front of us. I imagine they’re lighting their way home.

“She’s not my favorite person.”

“Women are hard to figure.” I surprise myself when I say this, not because I’ve said something, but because I sound like Mitchell when I say it.

“Mothers aren’t women.”

That’s who he meant. “It’s taking Maes and Avery forever.”

“How do you leave both kids behind?”

“Maybe they got lost.” I straighten myself up against the truck.

“And then go back and send for one.” He takes a chug from the cup, balls it up, and chunks it in the bed of his truck. He picks up another cup that sits, ready and waiting for him. He swats a fly from the rim and drinks.

I suck the bottom dry. When I’ve emptied the cup, I pour myself another and stand straight.

A little while later, half a cup empty, Maes and Avery ride up. To my surprise, it’s Avery who’s behind the wheel of Maes’s car. She bounces over to us and Maes eases on behind her, slow and purposeful.

Avery smiles at me and Mitchell, picks up a cup, and sips. “Mmm. Buffalo Rock.”

Mitchell and I don’t have to say anything else. There are some things Avery doesn’t have to know.

*

We stand around shooting the breeze for a while. Maes's hung up on a new Korean drama, something called *Style*. She can't decide if she likes the story, but she thinks I'd at least like the music. I tell her I'll give it a try. Eventually.

Mitchell stays awake through Avery's retelling of a ghost story she heard the other day, from somebody at church. It's funny, because none of us can really imagine Avery at church—Avery, a supernova of energy, a star always on the verge of imploding in on herself—sitting still in a dry heat of bodies. In the ghost story, a guy and a girl are driving along a narrow road in the middle of the night. Neither is supposed to be out, supposed to be together, but that doesn't stop the hand holding, the love-fest that goes on in that car. As they approach a curb, they see a man, holding a lantern, perched in the middle of the road. . . .

We're silent when Avery is done. Crickets, making love or war, vibrate in the strands of grass, moan out into the bright, white light of the moon. We decide to go for a drive. Anywhere, somewhere. Mitchell gets behind the wheel of the truck and Avery climbs onto the hood and rests her back against the windshield. She holds her hand out for Maes to take. Maes climbs on beside her. I settle into the bed and watch.

The road is long and empty, pitch black, blacker than me, filled with some potential, some promise of adventure, of excitement. I listen to the chatter Avery and Maes make, the soft, southern drawls of a lazy spring night. Mitchell taps his hand against the opening of the window, and the soft sounds of some old, familiar country song meander through the open window and into the thick, southern air. Mitchell's beat is off, the rhythm isn't right, but it's a good, nice kind of error; an adjustment.

I hear the static sound of an airplane and peer up in time to see it passing. It's low, lower

than seems possible, and Mitchell pokes his head out of the window to get a better view of it.

We follow. Mitchell maneuvers gentle, tight turns. We wind down crooked side streets, gravel roads. We follow the plane even though we're only going ten miles an hour. We follow, even though I can see over the top of truck, the close bodies of Avery and Maes, their hands held, their bodies asking gravity to work with them. We follow the plane into the night, until there's no sign of it, until there's no sign of anything but the low, rasping breaths of us.

*

On Monday and Tuesday, everything is fine. On Wednesday, Avery collapses during second period.

Maes skips French to stay with her. I find Mitchell in the lunchroom and together, we head to the nurse's office. When we arrive, we see this: Avery, curled up into a ball on a cot, her arms around her knees, her hair covering her face. Maes sits beside her, stroking Avery's hair, humming her a lullaby: "Moon on the Water."

The nurse's office is one big, slightly curved rectangle. Near the entrance is her desk and a medical cabinet, a few shelves filled with equipment—tongue compressors, cotton swabs, bandage tape. On the opposite side are four cots, each separated by a curtain. The final cot furthest in the back, I know from experience, is where the really sick kids sit—the kids with flu or pneumonia or mono.

The nurse is nowhere to be seen and for longer than we should, longer than we have to, Mitchell and I stand there, watching Maes and Avery and the room. And maybe Mitchell can feel it or maybe he can't or maybe there's nothing to feel at all, but I think, in the bottom of my stomach, in that same place I felt a note gathering, that we've walked in on something Mitchell and I can't handle. Something intimate and huge.

Mitchell is the first of us to approach them. He stands nearest to Maes. He's gentler than I think he's capable of.

"What's wrong?"

Maes strokes Avery's hair. "She's tired."

"It's got to be something bigger than that."

Maes snaps at him. "Well that's all I know."

Mitchell takes a step back, like she's taken a swipe at him. I hold up my hands and step closer to everyone.

"I'm sorry," Maes says.

Mitchell sticks his hands in his pockets. I can't tell what he's thinking. He watches Avery, from the top of her head to the tips of her feet, which are, oddly, shoeless. Her toes are still painted yellow but worn, little half moons.

Because I'll never have this moment again, I take note: I have been in a room with Avery for more than five minutes and she hasn't made a sound. She curls tighter into herself.

Maes continues to stroke her hair.

"Nobody's got a clue?"

I nod my head no.

The nurse comes in and nearly jumps back when she notices Mitchell and me. Nurse Barcott, approaching sixty, trying to revisit thirty, clears her throat. She's made up like one of Avery's dolls—red lips, powder face. She waves Mitchell and me over to her and we do as we're beckoned. She points to two stools near her medicine cabinet—locked behind a metal door—and we sit.

"Friends?" she asks.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t disclose medical information.”

Before Mitchell or before I have the chance to frown upset by this, Nurse Barcott amends her statement.

“But, since you’re friends, I’ll make a special exception for you boys.” She holds her hands out in front of her and pats Mitchell and me on our shoulders. The charmed bracelet she wears clangs against my shoulder. “She doesn’t have a fever. She hasn’t complained about any symptoms at all.”

“She’s not sick?” Mitchell asks.

“I can’t say that for sure. Her parents are on the way.”

Behind us, I hear Maes say, “Sssh, sssh,” to Avery. One of them shifts their weight on the bed.

The first bell chimes. Lunch is over. Nurse Barcott stands, as if she’d been waiting for the bell to ring. “Well, that’s the fourth period bell. It’s time for class now, boys.”

Mitchell looks at Nurse Barcott then over toward Maes and Avery. Nurse Barcott follows Mitchell’s eyes.

“Don’t worry. There’s no need for three people to stay. You two go. Leave things to me. Go to class.”

I peer over her head in time to see Maes glance up in my direction. The look doesn’t last more than two seconds, but we manage to say:

Don’t worry, I’ll watch Avery.

I know.

Before I can think of anything else that might be imbedded in our messages, Nurse

Barcott has Mitchell and me out the door, standing in the heat of traffic, warm bodies moving past and heading to fourth period. We make our way down the hallway, stomachs making music, and as we reach the stairs, Avery's Aunt Shannon approaches, scarf billowing behind her. She struts right past Mitchell and me without a word; we're both pulling out our cell phones and texting Maes, frantically. Frantically. Our fingers move faster than Aunt Shannon. She approaches the door but slows because of a progression of seniors. My fingers hit send and I pray, harder than I thought I would, that Maes gets the message before Aunt Shannon can open the door. All I had time to write was this:

Run away with Avery.

*

I don't have any character to compare Maes to. She doesn't seem like Maes Hughes, her namesake, nor does she seem like Roy Mustang or Sailor Mars or Faye Valentine or Vicious or any other anime character I could name. She doesn't look like Batman after his parents have died. There's nothing of Cat Woman in her eyes. I can spin through every animated superhero I know of—Goku, Spiderman, Domon Kasshu*, Captain America, Megaman—and I can't find one that ever looked like Maes does right now.

She sinks onto an art stool and I have to catch her by the arm before she falls off one side. Mitchell buys her a bottle of lemonade and sits it on the floor beside her. We both take a step back and gaze at her, and the world is different. I imagine medieval castles, stone walls with a drawbridge and a moat, black and white horses clattering, heard through the open window of the castle walls—we are in the main chamber, standing in front of the throne, our Queen, Maes, seated with her head cast down, her body limp, her hair a cape behind her, her scepter nowhere to be seen. We await her commands. What will she show us? What will she tell us? She speaks.

“I got your messages.” The strap of her messenger bag slips off her shoulder. “I didn’t have enough time.”

“We weren’t fast enough,” I say.

“Can’t see what else any of us could’ve done,” Mitchell says.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with Avery.” The bag slips completely off her shoulder and onto the floor.

We knights observe a moment of silence. Our Queen always knows what to do. It’s Maes who had us record the cost of going to AX. It’s Maes who created the money jar. It’s Maes who separates us when we argue, brings us together when we’ve all but given up. It’s Maes who asks more of us than we ask of ourselves, who listens to Avery’s exclamations and Mitchell’s and my bickering. If Maes can’t help us, then what do we do? What do we do?

“She’ll come around.” It’s Mitchell. He gathers up Maes’s bag and sits it, neatly, beside her lemonade. “Knowing Avery, she’s stressed out is all. Nobody can be that perky all the time.”

He’s the first of us to ever say this, but not the first to ever think it. I know, for the first time, that I wasn’t the only one to see it in Avery that day at the McAllister mansion. That Avery walks on eggshells, that Avery, at home in her home, is more at home here, with us. That Aunt Shannon is the root of everything.

“She’s probably worried about Spanish. But she’s getting better. She got a B on her test last week. A B.” He even smiles. “She’s getting better.”

Maes gets worse. She looks at Mitchell’s smile. She shuts her eyes as if they burn. “Let’s wait it out for a day. To see where things go.”

Mitchell and I don’t have any objections because we don’t have any ideas.

Maes gets to her feet and Mitchell and I both motion for her, like we’ll reach out and

steady her, but she lifts up her hand. “I’m good.”

“You missed lunch, didn’t you?” Mitchell asks.

Maes nods; how did he know that.?

He picks up the lemonade and hands it to her. “Give you some energy.”

I don’t know anything. I hold my hands out in front of me, both palms stretched out wide toward Maes. I shut my eyes.

“I’m giving you energy.” I focus, from feet to forehead, then to the palm of my hands. All of my energy, all that I can spare.

When I open my eyes, Maes is smiling. Not at me, but at Mitchell and me. He’s got his eyes shut, palms open, hands stretched out.

He’s giving her his energy.

*

I work on Thursday and Friday. May is approaching faster than I’d hope, and with a string of off days expected in late May—for finals—I have to work as much as I can, whenever Myrtle will let me. I don’t see Maes, Avery, or Mitchell outside of class.

I go straight home for work. I take my computer into the kitchen for a change and click away at eBay. I’m too tired to think about Avery. Instead, I bid on a Punch from *Cowboy Bebop* cosplay. The seller, TheBears, will want at least sixty dollars for it, but I start my bid at twenty five. I pretend not to glance at my phone every three minutes, hoping that Maes will call me. I wish, for a moment, that she wasn’t opposed to Facebook, that Mitchell and she would cave in and join up so communicating with either of them wouldn’t feel like some grand alchemic achievement.

Mom comes into the kitchen.

I don't say anything to her. Ever since this whole journey to AX started, Mom and I have been walking a tightrope of civility. She's stubborn. When her hair grayed, she dyed it. When Aunt Retta forgot her birthday, she "forgot" Aunt Retta's. And when I insisted on going to Anime Expo—when I asked her, in so many words, to treat me like an adult—she did. She's stopped doing my laundry. She's stopped leaving meals out for me. Dad tried to help—asked her once, quietly, to just let it go—but that had the opposite effect. She came down harder. She stopped monitoring me all together.

She hums and opens a cabinet. She's hunting for her coffee-flavored jellybeans, a favorite after dinner snack.

My dinner dishes are piled in the sink. I made my specialty, grilled cheese and Ruffles potato chips, while the rest of the family had lasagna. I could have just as easily fixed my own plate of lasagna. My mother would never stop me from eating.

But I'm stubborn too.

Mom doesn't comment on the dirty dishes. In the old days, she would have yelled at me for leaving them there. Nowadays, she doesn't say a thing about it. She eats a jellybean.

I've been outbid by one dollar. My fingers levitate over the keyboard. I need the costume for AX, but the thought of spending money—even bidding with money—makes me nervous.

"What are you doing?"

If I could craft wings and fly I would soar all the hell the way out of the kitchen right now. Mom stands behind me, peering over my shoulder. I have no idea when she got this close.

Punch's costume covers half the screen. He wears a white collared shirt, navy blue pants, a purple vest with one big red star on either side, a white cowboy hat, and gun holsters. While

none of that is alarming, Mom might be concerned with the white chaps he wears.

Disappointment is a heavy breath on my mother's lip. She sighs and says, "Lincoln. How long are you going to do this?"

"Do what?" I watch the time tick away on the Punch costume. Only a few more hours left.

"Don't play dumb."

"I'm not."

"You're a junior. You need to be worrying about your grades, not killing yourself trying to go to some annie-may conference and spending all your time locked up in the garage playing guitar. You need to focus."

Kenny's mom would never say that. Kenny's mom—her name is Mabel. Mabel Thomas—would tell Kenny to dream big. She'd tell her boy he could do anything. And so would Kenji's mom, in her own way. She'd tell Kenji to grow up big and strong like his father—killed in the war—would have wanted. I haven't read *En* in a week. I'm waiting for new scanlations—the illegal, fan-made versions—online, but they're late. What's happening in Kenny and Kenji's world? Are they still talking? Is there still magic everywhere?

"Listen to me." She shuts my laptop even though I'm not watching it anymore. I'm not watching anything anymore.

"Anime isn't going to help you get into college." She squeezes my hand and I hate it. I wish she'd grab my head and scare me like Mitchell's mom did. Grabbing is tough love; handholding is giving up. "We changed schools. We got you new textbooks. Aren't you happy there? Aren't you making any friends?"

Kenny carries his books using an old belt. Kenji carries his in a cloth. Kenny travels over

rocky roads to his school. Kenji ambles over debris, clods of earth moved from bomb blasts. Kenny has friends—there's Willie and Timothy. Kenji has Satomi-kun and Yamaguchi-kun and Tobe-kun. They all seem pretty happy together, despite the war, the poverty, the black and white lines.

Mom's hand is cold against my forehead. "How can I help you?" she asks me. "How?"

I just shake my head; I didn't know I was in need of help. I tug my hand from Mom's and stand. She doesn't step back, so I wiggle around her, grab my laptop and my phone, and go for the door.

"Lincoln," she says, but not like I'm in trouble. It's like my name is one she's just learned. She tests it out again. "Lincoln."

"Yes, ma'am?" I ask.

The kitchen still smells like lasagna. The Ragu has an earthy, hearty flavor that sticks to the floor of my nose. I inhale, exhale. Kenny and Kenji never smelled anything like this before. Kenny's family tended a Victory Garden, like other families did during the war. They were proud to do what they could for a country that hadn't done much for them. Kenji's family, still used to the wartime rationings, dined on miso, rice, whatever they could afford. I'm not going to have a panic attack. I'm going to be fine.

Mom doesn't say what's on her mind, so I go to my room. I shut and lock the door, tired, more tired than I've ever been. I want to be a hikikomori, a shut-in, a person who doesn't open his door and refuses to let in parents, teachers, classmates until Commodore Perry rides up in a warship and says time's up.

My cell phone beeps in my hand. I take a slow, steady breath. I unlock the phone and read.

We need to talk. Tomorrow, school.

It's from Maes. *Need.* I send my reply and know that this can't be good.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“I slept with Avery.”

When a meteoroid exploded over Russia that cold February morning in 2013, old wives were said to have sunk to their knees in prayer, their hands small pyramids before them, their backs parabolic from arthritis, their knees kissing the floors. In that position, as the white light made its arch across the sky, old wives must have thought the end of the world was coming; they must have thought an A-bomb had dropped, a power plant had lost its contents, a slick trail of science slipping through the metal of its stomach. Praying, on the cold winter floor, must have looked a lot like giving up. A lot like subjugation.

But what I mean to say is, the end of the world, no matter how it comes, no matter if it comes, will knock you off your feet. It will make a Congregationalist out of an atheist.

Maes sinks into a low squatting position. The bottom of her navy blue shorts nearly scrap the concrete floors of the art room, and her arms, held loosely by the fabric of her sweatshirt, plank either side of her head, her fingers meeting at the back of her neck. For a moment, she seems like she’s about to be lined up and executed. She moves her hands to the front of her face, a contemplative pyramid, the sign Tien* makes before he performs his tri-beam technique.

It’s Sunday, not Saturday. I had work on Saturday, so I moved the meet up to today. I pull Castro from my neck. I place him in his case and shut it. Somehow, I thought to bring music. Somehow, no matter what news unfolded today, I thought I could silence it with sound.

“I slept with Avery.”

I look down at Maes and don’t like it. I slide off my stool and squat in front of her.

She holds onto her knees. “I love Avery.”

It's never been a secret, not to me, and probably not to Avery, on some level, and definitely not to Mitchell, though knowing Mitchell, he's been pretending not to see it.

Pretending, so he doesn't have to hate Maes.

"I know I shouldn't have done it."

Loving Avery and actually sleeping with Avery are two different things.

She lifts her head up high, toward the ceiling. Her lips vacuum into one another. The curve of her neck is long and ostrich-like, beautiful, bowed.

"I didn't want Mitchell to have her." She stares at me and shrugs her shoulders, shakes her head a little as if to say, *isn't that the strangest thing?*

"Porquoi est-il Mitchell? Pourquoi n'est-ce pas moi?" Maes asks.

The first time I met Maes was on the steps in front of the school. I was trudging up from the bottom while she stood at the top, an anchor in waves of moving bodies.

I nearly swam right past her. She had her headphones on, I had my walls up. But as I got nearer to her, as I found the easiest path to the top of those stairs, Maes was humming. A sad, quiet tune, the sound you hear in your head during a tragedy. That quiet, stinging silence, almost too soft to hear, almost too loud to miss. The buzzing of a laptop; the sound of an empty room.

If she would cry I could do something. I could do something, maybe put an arm around her, like they do in anime, maybe tell her that it was all right, that she could trust me with this secret, that I would keep things confidential, kind, brief. I would lie for her.

She speaks in French. Incoherent babbling. Her words don't line up. I catch verbs, articles, nouns. My name is mentioned. She sings a song in French, gets the accents right. She breaks into a string of sayings—"Live. Love. Laugh."—"Never Give Up."—She makes a line of verbs.

I make up words. Pidgin of French and English. Quoilove, queforever. Pidgin of French and English and Japanese. Korehaj'taivous. Nouslesweare to forgettingwakaranai nandemonai nandemonai nandemonespas?

We babble on and on like that, incomprehensive blathering that doesn't work because we don't have the time, right now, to trace the history of our friendship, to find the moment where we became a *we*, a people that could talk about the warmth between Avery's legs and the frightening, bleeding, terrible squeezing of Maes's heart.

What level is this?

After a while, we're both exhausted. Between us, a new language has emerged, a sloppy language of articles and nouns and more questions than conclusions.

"Lincoln, don't ask me what I was thinking." Her head falls into her hands, her shoulders slump. She's squatting on the floor. She's "The Thinker," only much more desperate. She's "The Analyzer."

"We don't go around 'preying' on straight girls," she says. "I don't want people to keep thinking that we go around searching for anyone. I love Avery. I really, really love Avery."

"You look guilty." That's not what I want to say. What I want to ask is, *if you love Avery, if what you did was consensual and if nobody got hurt, what's the problem?* I mean, what's your problem?

She balks. I have stunned her. "I'm not fucking guilty. Not for loving Avery."

"That's not what I meant." What I mean is, that I can't be the kind of friend she needs right now. I'm not the kind of friend who can stare right at her and tell her that everything's going to be okay, that she and Avery are going to be fine, that she and I will be good, that loving another girl is fine. I can't actually lie for her.

“That’s what it sounds like. Choose your fucking words, Lincoln. Choose them, okay? Otherwise, you’re really going to end up hurting someone.”

I lean forward. “I really didn’t mean it that way.” A thought: this is the first time I’ve thought of Maes as a friend. A friend and not a means to my end.

“She doesn’t want me. She doesn’t want to be alone.” She folds her arms over her chest. The muscles in her thighs and calves tighten as she tilts forward on her toes.

Then that’s it. She feels cheap. She feels easy. “Does that matter? I mean, all that really matters is how you feel.” What would Spike say?

“Where’d you pick that up?”

“Some shoujo shit.” What happened to Avery? What was it that made her collapse? I want to ease these questions into the conversation, but I can’t find a signal.

Maes falls forward and has to catch herself with her knuckles. She balances, somewhere between a kneel and a prayer.

“You know the good thing,” I say, “about one-sided love stories?”

She continues to balance on her knuckles. She sways, and her hair sweeps the floor.

“You’re always the hero.” What would Faye say?

She rubs the fleshy part of her palm against her eye. She isn’t crying. “You’re like a fortune cookie sometimes.”

“In your future,” I say, “I see happiness.”

“That’s very specific.”

“Stick a dollar in me and maybe we’ll talk.”

She laughs. She makes a sudden sway to the left, and the moment where I could catch her, where I could stop her from tipping over, passes.

“I know you’re depressed and everything,” I say, “but can I ask you something?”

“No.”

“How was it?”

“Are you kidding me, Lincoln?” She pushes me down.

I land on my ass. “I was asking.”

“She wasn’t a hook-up. You know her.” She emphasizes *know*, because knowing Avery makes things especially complicated, because everything has already been complicated for me, what with the image of Maes and Avery, naked, rolling around together, gasping each other’s names.

The part of me enjoying that image conflicts with the part of me that knows if this were Mitchell Harris and a boy, any boy, I could not have this moment. I could not pretend to be okay with men kissing, men hugging, men moaning.

As much as I like Avery and Maes, and as much as I pretend to be one hundred percent okay with the way Maes is, with the way Maes loves, I can’t actually be okay about it. I’ve tried—with the Skittles, with this moment—but I can’t actually pretend that the idea doesn’t bother me. That the part of me that has been taught to believe in the holiness of the word and the sanctity of biology is not appalled by the unnaturalness of their union; by the geometry of parts that don’t fit, babies that won’t be born of this connection.

I definitely don’t mean to ask this. “Where?”

“Where?” she asks.

I nod.

The question has more weight than my body can carry. The where and the when and the how implied in it. Where did this happen? When did this become an idea, and not only an idea,

but an actualization, an event, one that I can mark down on this day and at this time and in this spring morning—Avery McAllister, heiress to a throne, and Maes Arden, owner of none, consummated their whateverness, together.

Where did you take Avery?

“Where would you take her?”

That’s not the answer I wanted, there’s not an answer I have for such an impossible question that I didn’t, couldn’t possibly ask. But in that question, I find another. Where, in our state, in a place so saturated in red and homogeny and Christianity, could Maes take Avery?

Home is the only answer and in that answer rests another question. Maes surveys me.

“Home?” I ask.

“Home.”

“Your parents?”

“Absent.”

“Your parents,” I ask, “are cool with this?” I gesture at the universe.

“My parents just want me to be safe. They’d care that I was safe.”

“But they don’t know about Avery?”

“Some things are better left unsaid, Lincoln, and it has nothing to do with being girls.”

If they’re okay with Maes being Maes and Maes is okay with Maes being Maes then why are things the way they are? Why are we crouched on the art room floor, on the very edge of friendship? Do we jump or swim or float or go through the motions, the undone motions, the unsaid motions, the unsaid questions and unsung answers, the six curing steps of being, the acknowledging, telling, asking, listening, praying, healing?

I won’t have my answers today. I can’t. Maes has had all she can have of this

conversation. She bounces up, her hands never touching the floor, the springs of her thighs propelling her up into five feet, nine inches of girl. She dusts off the seat of her pants then offers me her hand.

I let her pull me up. I work out the stiffness in my joints, in my legs, only so much longer than Mae's, only so much more needing the comfort that comes with being a full self.

“You want to go to Johnny Rockets?”

I cut eyes at her, Brock from *Pokemon* eyes. “Seriously, Maes? I fucking hate that place.”

Johnny Rockets, decked out to the core in fifties and sixties memorabilia, does to me what I assume going through World War II memorabilia does to holocaust survivors. While I know the difference between genocide and vinyl seating, xenophobia and glass Coke bottles, I have trouble reconciling the images of happy fifties and sixties with Civil Rights fifties and sixties and all that came before it, all the years of another kind of genocide, of another kind of mass murder, in the form of bondage. With Jim Crow Laws still intact, with bus rides, with bridge crossings, with little girls being blown to smoke while other little girls dined on the delicacies an unscarred life provides: cheeseburgers and sodas and the bubbly, bright songs heard on the jukebox, heard through the radio, as the sounds of one hundred footsteps, on the other side of the street, drowned out with every gulp.

“They've got great burgers.”

“Maes.”

“And malts.”

“Maes.”

“Why should I be the only one who's hurting?” She scoops up her messenger bag. She loops the bag over her shoulder, and it lands with a soft thunk against her naked thigh.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

I gather all that belongs to me. We go to Johnny Rockets.

*

The restaurant is at the corner of The Summit, an inexpensive diner at the edge of one of the more expensive malls of Birmingham-not-Birmingham, a place that is as much Birmingham as downtown, as Roebuck or First Avenue, but considers itself more elite, more wealthy, more better. The Jos. A. Bank, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Coach stores create a wealth that cuts through the smell of hamburgers and French fries.

We are greeted and seated almost immediately. Nobody pays us any mind, really, not our hostess, blonde and wearing red and white, not our waitress, my complexion and wearing a perfected smile.

We opt for a booth, I guess, because it adds to the authenticity. There are all these images of fifties men and women, the kind of characters you see on a somee greeting card, but not. Somee cards are ironic, but nostalgic. Johnny Rockets is different. No sarcasm, no jokes, but bright smiles and scenes of happier, whiter times.

“I’m going to kill you,” I mutter to Maes.

She pulls the wrapper from her napkin and undoes the folds. “If you must.” She produces a knife.

I wither into the red plastic vinyl of my booth. My legs stretch under the table, touch her legs then move before the touch has a chance to really register.

“Think of it as an adventure.”

“How?” I flip through a menu.

“Adulthood.”

Behind me, beside me, in front of me are teenagers serving food, teenagers eating it, a few adults sprinkled in for flavor—parents still in love with their kids enough to dine with them, kids still young enough to allow this.

“How is this adulthood?”

“Doing something you don’t want to do. What could be more adult than that?”

I kick her. She kicks me back. Our waitress comes over and we order two Chocolate Banana malts, one Cookie and Cream one, two Smokehouse burgers—one double, one single—and two orders of fries.

We sink into our booths, sated by the idea of food.

“I bet Luffy* would love this place.”

“Yeah,” I say. He wouldn’t give a shit about the fifties stuff; Luffy—from *One Piece*—just wants to eat. “Burgers and fries.”

“Do you remember that episode of *Dragon Ball Z*,” she asks, “where Goku and Vegeta and the other Saiyans—”

I sit up. “Buu saga, right? Right before the martial arts tournament, and they eat that big meal, and the martial arts dudes seem like they’re wondering *what planet did you people come from.*”

“Right.”

“Love that episode, man,” I say.

She glares at me for calling her *man*.

“Sorry. Look, Vegeta’s face.” I pull it up on my phone and show her a screencap of

Vegeta eating, cheeks stuffed. We snicker and sink into our seats.

“I love the Buu saga,” Maes says. “Especially the Gohan part.” There’s this whole story arc about Gohan going off to fight crime while trying to protect his identity as a normal high school student. He starts calling himself “The Great Saiyaman” and wearing a ridiculous costume. The arc’s got all the campiness of the Christopher Reeve Superman movies.

“When Vegeta punches Trunks in the face and then tells him to wipe his tears, they’re going to the park.” I don’t even finish that sentence. I laugh.

“Parenting at its finest.”

“Well, you can’t pick your parents.”

Maes readjusts the flatware on the table. She straightens up against her seat. “For someone who hates this place, you knew the menu well.”

“It serves burgers. How hard is it to pick a burger?”

“Guess that’s a point.” Her eyes fall everywhere but on me.

I sit up to mention as much but she cuts me off.

“Lincoln,” she says, and her tone is suddenly a gentle kind of serious, the sound a mother makes when she explains to her child that someone has passed. “Don’t be afraid.”

I squint. “Of what?”

“Of here.” She jabs her finger against the table. “Of this city. It belongs to you.”

“Where’s this coming from?”

“I know you hate Johnny Rockets,” she says, “and I know you hate the Summit and school and Avery’s house. But you have to give things a chance.”

“I do give things a chance.”

“Have you been to Bottletree? Zydeco? WorkPlay?”

I shake my head no.

“You’re a musician,” she says, “but you haven’t been anywhere where the music is. You have to live in a place before you can hate it.”

I just laugh. This coming from the girl who’s in a panic over Avery. Whose love for Avery is an abomination in this city. And yet, she’s defending it.

The waitress returns with our malts. We devour the Chocolate Banana malts and split the Cookies and Cream shake, carefully divide it into two glasses. We don’t talk anymore but I feel like bursting. By the time we finish the malts, our waitress returns with our food, a cloud of steam covering each plate like a tiny, complete sky. The waitress draws a ketchup-heart on an empty plate between us. We devour our meal and everything is just like Maes wants. Now, we’re both hurting.

*

Avery wears a scarf on Monday. Tiny white owls on gray fabric. We don’t have first period together, but I’m surprised, nonetheless, when she avoids me in the hallway, when she doesn’t come up and hug me or chatter on and on about what’s happening in *En* or a break in the doujinshi manga she’s making.

I don’t ask. I slump to my pre-calculus classroom and take my seat behind Maes. We have a test today, something not about functions for once, but Maes isn’t studying like she normally does before any kind of exam. In fact, she isn’t doing shit. She’s sitting there, her head bent downward, a pencil in her hand, her hair swooped to one side.

I reach out to hit her with my pencil and ask what’s going on, but pause before I reach her. Is it something I can deal with? An illness, a loss, a something like that? Or is it an Avery thing, and if it’s an Avery thing, am I really the one to be asking about it? Am I the sidekick in a

shounen manga, the sassy friend in a shoujo one? What can I possibly tell her that she doesn't already know? What can I say that would even begin to be sincere?

Abner enters and Maes watches the board. I drop my hand. She picks up her notebook and scans the pages in front of her: a clusterfuck of equations, scribbled in purple.

The bell rings. Papers are stowed. The test begins.

*

I open up the cabinet in the art room and pull out our money jar, buried beneath a pile of linseed oil-soaked rags. I deposit two blue fifties in Monopoly money. Because I've got work and not a lot of time, I write out a note:

Link was here. Put in one hundred. Gone to work.

I leave when I'm finished and head to The Guitar Shop. It's a slow day, and the customers come in one by one, like they're mourners, like they're a part of some slow, steady death procession. I can't take the silence. Even though I know I shouldn't, because customers need to be able to test their instruments when ready, I put in a CD. "Creep" from the *Pablo Honey* album slips its way through the speakers, and even my manager, hard-assed as she can be about the radio, nods her head in a stoned, approving way.

Myrtle, large, low to the ground, and on her fifth fortieth birthday, gets real particular about the music we play, about playing music at all, but she gives me a break today.

"This song's before your time." Myrtle shifts her head from left to right, like a snake charmer. "It's a good pick."

"Yeah."

"We're all creeps, Lincoln. Each and every one of us."

We've got one customer, a white kid in chucks. He's got on a yellow Pac-Man hoodie. I

immediately know he's an anime lover. I have a sixth sense.

"We're creeps," Myrtle says, "because we've been in love."

I wonder what he watches. It's kind of a game I play, where I try to see if someone's a fan, and then I see if I can figure out what series they watch. He touches the body of a Fender.

"Love makes you into a creep. That's why I don't fool with it." Myrtle has been married three times to three different Teds. When you ask her about it—and I have and people continue to ask her about it—she tells me that she never saw them coming, the marriages or the subsequent divorces.

"But it's a good thing, too. Cause there's really nothing wrong with being a creep. Everyone creeps."

The Pac-Man steps to the cash register holding an electronic tuner. I ring him up. He pays in cash and leaves.

If asked, Myrtle'll say that she'd marry another Ted. If asked, she'll say loving someone is the best thing there is.

*

I don't see anyone on Tuesday morning. I fail a government quiz asking about Birmingham's legislative structure, then BS my way through a French quiz on verbs. I run into Mitchell at lunchtime, and he tells me that he added two hundred and fifty Monopoly funds to the jar, but that he has to work during the afternoon. This is about as much talking as we can stomach for the moment, so I leave him be.

After classes are over, I catch Avery in the hallway in front of the art room. She studies the door, large and wooden and nicked, as if itself is a work of art.

I sneak up behind her. "Going in?"

There are two long seconds before she turns around and says, “Link-kun! Hi!”

She wears the same owl printed scarf as before. I don’t think I’d notice, except that Avery rarely wears anything two times in a row.

“Hey, Avery.”

“Link-kun, Avery has a stomachache.” She doubles over, her arm hugging her stomach, her back bent, the view down her shirt too impressive to ignore.

It’s all too impressive to ignore. Because when she bends, I see red marks spotting her like freckles, bloody rashes blossoming from her skin. Or are they something else?

She catches my stare and stands straight. I’m surprised when her ears flush, a light pink, growing pinker by the moment. Her hair is down today, and she tucks strands behind her ears and rubs her lobes.

“Everything okay?” I don’t mean to ask this.

“Of course, Link-kun! Avery is feeling sick today and thought she would go home.”

I stand at the art room door. I glance behind me, down the stretch of hall, down toward the double doors that open into another hallway that opens another set of doors that lets us out into the world, onto the hilltop.

“Pit stop,” Avery says. She puts her hands out in front of her and pretends to grip the handles of a bike. “Vroom, vroom. Avery needs her special fantastical color pens before she goes home. But Avery has to worry or Aunt Shannon will hurry.”

“What?”

She laughs. She covers one side of her face with her hand. “Hurry. Or Aunt Shannon will worry.” She removes her hand. “Aunt Shannon will worry.” She’s crying. “Worry.”

She sits on the floor and draws her knees into her chest. She rests her head on her knees

so that I can't see her face.

Even still, I know she's crying.

I sigh, scan the near empty hallway, and sit beside her.

A girl I don't know gives us a face—concern, fear, both—but I ignore it. Hesitantly, I put my hand on Avery's back. It's warm, feverish maybe, and shaking.

“Should I call somebody?”

She takes me by the edge of my shirt sleeve.

“You want to go inside the art room?” The girl still gawks at us, and it creeps me out.

I stand and pull Avery with me. Her skin pinkens everywhere I touch her, from pressure and nothing else. I take her into the art room and shut the door behind us.

Avery sits on the art room floor, filthier than the hallway one. I stand in front of her and wait.

Kenji's question. The one about Superman and the bombings. The thing about Superman is, he has to survive, that's what Kenny thinks. He has to because Kenny has to survive and Superman is something to hold onto. He has to because you can't kill a hero, you can't kill Superman. Kenny tightens his fist around the letter. But Kenji is real. Kenji *survived* the bombings. So what can Kenny say but this:

Superman is like Kenji. He can survive anything.

“Do you believe in Hell, Link-kun?”

Avery brings me back. “I believe in Heaven, sort of.”

“I'm probably not good enough to go there.”

“What did you do?”

She draws her knees closer to her chest. The red marks on her neck burn brighter. “A bad

thing.”

“Ask for forgiveness. The Lord will forgive us of our sins.” I really want to mean this, so I do.

“It’s the Catholics who have confessionals, Link-kun.”

Brighter and brighter, the love marks glow. Maes’s lingering love marks, marking Avery’s skin like small confessionals.

“If you ask hard enough,” I say, “all things are forgiven. Even the things that don’t need forgiveness.” What would Jet say?

“Do you pray?”

“Whenever I need something.” Every day.

“Does it work?”

I shrug. When I see her face, it’s full of water.

“We could try it.”

We do. We recite The Lord’s Prayer, and Avery’s eyes wrap tight around trespasses and temptations. My words are quiet, but Avery’s are urgent, quick things, shot up like fireworks. When we’re done, she doesn’t say *Amen*.

I remember what Jet says in episode twenty of *Cowboy Bebop*—there’s nothing as innocent and cruel as a child. When I look at Avery huddled beside me, I can’t help but think I’ve seen a small cruelty.

*

Wednesday arrives, late as usual. I catch a glimpse of Avery as I pull books from my locker. She doesn’t approach me, but she waves from her spot across the hall and because I don’t know what else to do, I wave back, once. She becomes lost to me, in a crowd.

I take my seat in pre-calculus. There's supposed to be another quiz today, this time on limits. I open my book and notebook and review my notes. I try to ignore the tab sheet I've scribbled near the definition of a one-sided limit and the "Live in Baghdad" lyrics I've written under the date, but it's hard. Lately, my music has taken a backseat to working and animeing and Maesing, and I don't like it. My hands are itching for a sound, any sound. I do hand stretches while I study the page in front of me. $\lim_{x \rightarrow 1^+} g(x)$ and $\lim_{x \rightarrow 1^-} g(x)$.

The bell rings and Abner tells us to take out a pencil and a sheet of paper, calls roll, and I notice, for the first time, that Maes isn't here. I take a mental catalogue of the room. I see twenty three other students. I see Abner's desk. I see two blackboards and two white ones. But I don't see Maes.

Mr. Abner speaks. I shut my notebook. We take the quiz.

*

The year is 1967 and Wilhelm Harster, on trial, will eventually be sentenced to fifteen years for murdering nearly eighty-three thousand Jewish folk. Fifteen years for eighty-three thousand people, and by my math that's five thousand, five hundred and thirty-three people for every year, as if a life can be rounded, as if three hundred and sixty five days in the life of a mass murderer is worth two million, nineteen thousand and sixty-six days in the lives of innocent people.

I'm weary of Avery. So, as Miss Dubois rounds off her list of 1967 life events, I don't ask Avery about Maes. We're all allowed one or two sick days, and seeing as how Maes has never missed a class this year, I figure she's earned it.

I zone out during British literature. We're finally post-Shelley, but if I'm being honest about it, this whole class has little to do with me, and really anybody in the classroom. Old dead

white men writing about old dead white men stuff. Even the conservatives are bored to tears, so I tune out everything Mr. Whittaker is saying, and add up the days. Three weeks left till summer.

I spot Mitchell at lunch. We acknowledge each other and he tells me that he won't be stopping by today, that he's got work to do at Sloss, something about a national conference involving iron pouring being held there. We separate, and I join my classmate Chris for lunch and I eat and we talk—sports, partly, but mostly about whether we think next gen consoles ought to go on ahead and make themselves backward-compatible. They should.

I stop by the art room after school and deposit one Monopoly dollar into the jar. Only Avery is there, and she's on her way out, holding a stack of colored pens. She has none of her usual attire—the Witch Hunter Robin hairstyle, the rainboots, the short skirt—but she's not wearing one of her aunt's handpicked dresses, either. She's bundled up in a yellow varsity jacket with a panther on the back but it's seventy-six degrees and she's flushed. Her eyes refuse to meet mine. I go with her to the parking lot and we say our goodbyes without the usual fanfare that Avery enjoys. I've got a bit more time than usual between work, so I end up sitting in the parking lot, listening to Nujabes* "Modal Soul." It's pure jazz, a percussive of instruments, saxophone, bass, drums. The sound is like flying. No, like the end of a very long journey, an ascent before a beautiful, charged descent. Like peace.

*

Maes doesn't show up on Thursday or Friday. In fact, I go to the art room and nobody's there, except for Avery, and she's always on her way out. One day was fine, two days were all right, but three days sends me into worst-case scenario mode. Even Abner, who tries to have as minimal contact with me as possible, asks if Maes is okay and if I wouldn't mind sending her the homework so she doesn't fall behind, which we both know is kind of ridiculous, seeing as how

Maes seems to be two steps in front of Abner and seeing as how he could probably email her the assignments. But I agree to it.

My first idea is to scan and email her the notes, but then I think, maybe, that she's so sick she can't use a computer or that she's hurt and in danger and I'm the only one who can help her, like maybe she's been kidnapped or some shit, abducted by aliens, held hostage at a bank, and she needs my help whether she knows it or not. ESPers could have taken her, she might be God, she might be gone. In this haze of possibilities, I pull out the student directory—a thing that, before this instance, seemed ancient and useless—and find Maes's address.

Because it's Saturday and because I don't know how long this is going to take and because, maybe, Maes might be in the mood for some music, I pack up Castro and take him with me on my way to Maes's house, which is clear across town, in Forest Park, not far from Five Points South. It's Southside, which means it's full of hipsters, young families, rich Democrats, light, light, light blue dots in a red state. The only thing separating it from Southtown Projects is St. Vincent's hospital, a McDonald's, and Western Grocery.

There stand new houses beside homes old enough to tell stories; I remember when the streets were cobblestones, when horsepower was measured in horses, when women were ladies, dressed to the neck and to the foot. I drive onto a tree-lined, sidewalked street separated by a shrubbed-up median, pass Highland Towers, toward Underwood Park, a place I've never been. Cars are parked diagonally on one side of the road—Chevys, Toyotas, Mercedes—and parked straight on the other side—Volkswagen, Mini Coopers, Hondas. As I round a soft curve—really, I'm driving on Snake Way*—I see houses on small inclines, houses that seem to grow bigger and better and larger and grander the further I go in. I obey the speed limit. Thirty miles an hour, I'm cruising. I make a turn, then another, and I'm up a hill.

My GPS beeps and I park in front of a compact blue house, perfect. *Alice in Wonderland*. A literal white picket fence surrounds the yard—I can't even call it that. It's more like a miniature Eden. There's a garden, a leafy, green, overgrown garden. Non-ironic gnomes rise from the petals of purple flowers, violets, I think, because they remind me of the one's in my Madear's house—African violets. Stone steps lead me to the front door, suspiciously red, suspiciously welcoming, with two white, iron chairs and a small table on either side. I imagine Maes sitting out here, drinking tea, and the thought nearly topples me. Maes the cynic, Maes the tea drinker. I ring the bell.

A short white woman with light brown, shoulder-length hair answers the door while her husband, white, bearded, something like a cross between Paul Bunyan, the Bounty Man, and someone from a bluegrass group—which one, I can't remember—slinks by. The mother's eyes are dark as mine. She smiles at me.

“Hi,” she says. “Can I help you?”

“Hello,” I say. I glance to my right to check the address, then back up at the woman, who smiles at me. “Sorry, I'm looking for the Ardens.”

“We are the Ardens.” She waves at me and I wave back, kind of. I hold up my hand and move it a little.

“I'm searching for Maes?” I ask. I'm not sure any more. I'm confused. Really, really confused.

She pokes out her lips.

I remember. “Clover, I mean. We call her Maes.”

“Oh!” she says. She smiles. “Are you Lincoln? Come in, come in.”

I enter in through the small entry and into the den. I carry Castro like a baby, held tight in

one arm. This woman knows my name. This is Maes's house and I doubt that this woman is her white maid.

Alice in Wonderland halts. There are jade Buddha statues, bronze elephants, crinkled Chinese rice field hats, black masks, dark as me, born from a part of African I don't know, have never been to, will never go to, have never thought about, hanging on a red wall beside a clock that tells, of all things, the time in Antarctica. Some kind of smoky incense burns harsh enough that I can almost taste it—honeysuckle mixed with hickory.

She catches me. "We like to travel. How about you? Do you travel any?"

"A little, Ms. Arden." I adjust the straps on my backpack. "I am Lincoln, by the way." She's already said it, but I feel the need to confirm it, anyway.

"Call me Gwendy. Make yourself at home." She motions to a fluffy, sandy-colored couch.

Like I could really call her Gwendy. I survey the couch, but before I can tell her that no, I'm fine standing, her husband reappears, this time holding a book.

"Clover will be right out." Paul Bunyan greets me. "Nice to meet you. I'm Matthew." Paul Bunyan holds out his hand and I shake it. His hands are huge.

I introduce myself again.

"You're one of the ones she's going to the convention with?" He scratches his brick-colored beard.

"Yes sir. My brother's chaperoning."

"Excellent. I was worried, to tell you the truth." He tucks the book further under his arm. "I don't like her traveling without an adult. I know Avery has family there and you all were going to check in with them, but still. But what can you do? She's seventeen."

I've never had an adult talk to me like this, like I'm human. I hate it. I like it.

"We were going to call your brother and introduce ourselves. We wanted to arrange a meeting sometime. Thank him for chaperoning. Is that okay?"

I nod. I knew they'd eventually want to meet him. I'll have to make it later rather than sooner.

"Matt worries too much. Don't you remember? When we went to Honduras as freshmen?"

"I still have the scars." He holds out his left leg and yanks up his pants by the knee. There's a memory of a scar, a slender red scratch on his ankle that I can barely see for all the hairs. "Fell off a trail."

"It's very hard to fall 'off' a trail." Gwendy laughs. "But it's cute when it happens."

"Percival's very responsible." I don't know what else to say. He's Percival, not Percy, when he's responsible.

"I don't doubt it," Paul Bunyan says. "I hear you're paying your way for this trip?"

I nod. I don't like these questions. I don't like having their attention.

"He's such a cool kid," Gwendy says. "Why weren't we this cool when we were his age?" Her pupils are huge. Bright. It's hard not to stare at them, but I try.

"What kind of guitar is that?" Paul Bunyan fingers his beard, an entry into nostalgia.

I sit Castro's case on the floor and open it. Paul Bunyan lowers himself to my level and studies Castro. "Gibson? That's good stuff. How long have you played?"

"Since I was eight." I take out Castro. I don't mean to, but I offer it to him and he takes it.

"Oh no," Gwendy says, "Oh no. You might never get that back."

Paul Bunyan holds the neck with his left hand, balances the body on his right thigh. He

moves his finger toward the third fret, down to the first string. He straightens his back, cross-legged on the floor, and for a moment I don't know whether he wants to play or just remember what it feels like to feel—to remember what it means to make music.

Maes moseys in, her hair wet, looking like a red-cheeked Pikachu. She walks over to her father and me, both sitting near or on the floor, and her mother wipes a wet lock from her forehead.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“I'm focusing here,” Paul Bunyan says.

Maes huffs, then notes me. “This way.”

Paul Bunyan frowns.

“Keep it,” I say, nodding toward Castro. I follow behind Maes, up the stairs, down a narrow hallway, and into a room in a back corner of the house.

Everything is purple. Grapico, lavender, plum. Purple comforter, purple pillows piled up on the floor with a purple light dangling down. Purple walls with dandelion seeds being blown in the wind, around the perimeter of the room. There are books everywhere—mangas, encyclopedias, books about cooking Persian food, books on religion, books on astronomy, books on other books, comic books, books on building paper cranes, books on being, books on philosophy, books on history—Aztec, Mayan, Russian, African, French, Japanese, no Korean—books on one hundred and one new positions for you and your lover.

“What?” Maes asks.

I stare at her then at the floor, to the level below, where her father plays with my guitar and her mother insists I call her Gwendy. I nod my head for emphasis.

“I’m adopted,” Maes says.

“Well no shit.”

She kicks me in the shin—it doesn’t hurt, because she wears socks, not shoes—and sits on her purple bed.

I opt for the hardwood floor. Everything is itchy—armpits, neck, head, left nostril. I scratch my head and my calluses ache.

Maes pulls her hair to one side, picks up a wide-toothed comb from a lilac nightstand and works it through the thickness.

I stare at her until she pays me attention.

“Really, Lincoln?”

For reasons I don’t care to fully comprehend at the moment, I feel betrayed. Vicious and Spike-level betrayed. You-slept-with-my-girlfriend-then-decided-to-leave-the-syndicate-and-now-we’re-enemies betrayed. I nod, firmly.

She repositions herself on her bed, sits on her knees. “I’m Korean. South Korean, if we’re being specific.”

“Pretty sure we hate the other Korea.” I slouch forward and rub my neck. I want to sit here and sleep.

“Mom and Dad adopted me when I was very young. That’s all there is to say.”

“What do you mean that’s all there is to say? I’ve known you for almost a year. Were you ever going to tell me you were adopted?” I kind of want to raise my voice, I really do, but we aren’t lovers and this isn’t shoujo and her parents are downstairs and it’s very possible to be quiet and angry.

“Does it matter?” She struggles to untangle an end. “Parents are parents. I don’t know

your whole life story.”

“But you’ve been to my house,” I say. I grip the top of my backpack. She knows things about my parents while I apparently don’t know anything about hers. Yeah, maybe parents are parents, maybe parenting is a concept and not a biology, but I think that at some point, at some point during the nine months we’ve eaten together, read together, talked together, she might have mentioned that she was a Korea-born adoptee, a transcontinental baby bred, of all places, in the South.

“Don’t overthink things. I love my parents.”

“I’m not saying you don’t. They seem like nice people.” But all this time I’ve thought of us as partners. As others in a white world, as outcasts in the burning south, yearning for something bigger and brighter than a red state. I’ve said things I wouldn’t have said. Revealed things about myself and my culture that maybe she wasn’t supposed to hear. I’ve considered her, this entire time, to be the only one—it can’t be Avery, it most definitely can’t be Mitchell—to understand why it is this place sucks the life out of me. I’ve told her my dreams.

What other things has she been hiding? “Forget it. Where have you been?” I pull off my backpack, pull out her homework assignments, and toss them on the floor.

“Did you tell them I haven’t been to school?”

“Should I?”

She glares at me, but continues to comb.

“Well? Where were you?”

“Around. I went to the McWane Center one day. I know I’m too old for it, but I really wanted to ride the bike.” A tumbleweed of hair sticks to the comb, and she pulls it from the teeth and places it onto the side table. The mattress squeaks. “The one that hangs from the second

floor.”

I grip my ankles, butterfly my body. It feels meditative. Light arrives through her window. The purple curtains are open.

“Another day, I went to Plato’s Closet. I thought I might be able to find something I could use for our cosplay, but I couldn’t. I’ve been thinking that we could go thrifting.”

“Maes.”

“Lincoln.” She combs her hair.

“Why?”

“I saw you with Avery.”

I cup my chin in my hand, remove my hand and suck in my lips. “Yeah?”

“I can’t go back. I really hurt her.”

She’s confused, I want to say. She wants to talk to you. She wants to sort this out. She wants forgiveness as much as you do. She knows you. She knows you better than I do.

“I’m a horrible person.”

“You’re not.” *But you’re not perfect.*

“I am.”

“You have to go to school.”

“I can’t see her right now.”

“You’ll fall behind.” The art room is lonely. Mitchell is working, Avery is avoiding us. The art room, it has to be lonely, right?

She shakes her head no. “Don’t tell Mom and Dad.”

“Maes.”

She picks up a bath towel and throws it over her head.

There's a knock on the door. I open it, and Paul Bunyan hands Castro, case and all to me. He thanks me. He asks if I want something, a snack or a drink, and I say no, thank you, I'm fine and he says let us know if you need something, we'll be out on the front chairs, soaking up the sun. I thank him and shut the door.

Maes doesn't remove the towel. I take my space on her floor, hold Castro in my hands, and, because it's the only tune I can think of, I play "Creep."

*

I research Korean adoptions when I get home. I find a place called Holt International, and scroll through the pages. Korean adoptions, I learn, are big in the US. Some states can adopt more freely than others, and Alabama, southern as it is, is not one of them. Adoptees in our state, if I'm reading this right, tend to be disabled kids, but Maes doesn't seem to fit that bill. What would be her disability? Unused talent? An abundance of sarcasm?

Lesbianism?

I shrug away the thought that makes me hate myself. I scroll through images of kids—kids not named Eun or Su-bin, but Patty, John, Tom, Emma. As if these kids, from birth, were expected to be flown to America. As if the one and only life that existed for them was one embraced by white arms and blue-green eyes.

Who was she before this? Before she was Clover? Before she was Maes? How many names has she had, how many people has she been in the seventeen years she *has* been? How does that feel? Clover, Maes, the girl she was before she was either of those names. What is it like to grow up Korean in a white house, to be Asian in Alabama, to be an Other in a family of three? Is this why she gets quiet, sometimes, when families come up? Is this why she's adamant that Mitchell's on-the-way sibling is a good thing? Is this why she gets to go to AX, few

questions asked?

Who is Clover Arden, and is she the same as Maes?

I close Lady. Can we recover from this?

CHAPTER NINE

In *Dragon Ball*, Old Gohan finds baby Goku in a field. Baby Goku, naked and crying, warms to the old man in a matter of moments. Old Gohan lifts Baby Goku up above his head, up as high as his old bones can lift the healthy, large baby boy. From Baby Goku's perspective, he must have thought he'd been given a view of the world. The green grass and fields, the sky blue, the clouds high and white. From Gohan's perspective, he must have thought of the adventure, of the joys and pains that come with raising a kid, a kid who was, upon first sight, not of this world.

Old Gohan couldn't have known that the boy he adopted, the boy he named Goku, would end up saving the world again and again, so much saving, enough that his employment became world saving. Goku: superhero. Goku: adopted son of Gohan. Not adopted son. Son of Gohan, Son Goku. I don't think Goku ever thinks himself adopted, taken in, brought in, cared for in a way that says he could have been somewhere other than that exact spot Gohan found him, that says that anyone but Gohan could have been his parent.

I grab my backpack from my bed. Maes's situation seems more complicated to me. She hasn't saved the world, not yet. Her parents aren't drawn in the same style she is; they're cut of different stuff. Should that matter?

I walk downstairs into the kitchen and find Mom sitting at the table. She takes her coffee black, no sugar, no nonsense.

"Hello." If I don't greet her, I'm in trouble. If I do greet her, I remember how she really feels about me. I'm a loser. A dreamer. I need to get my act together.

She gives me a weary smile. This is our morning routine on the days she's here, which even out to a few days a week. In the morning, she's too tired to be angry or frustrated with me.

And honestly, I think by now she's just sorry for me.

She's not the kind of mother that makes weekday breakfast for us. I grab the box of Cheerios from atop the cabinet, pull out the gallon of milk from the fridge, grab a bowl and spoon. I stick a Pop-Tart in the toaster, on the lowest setting, then sit across from Mom. I make my breakfast, careful to watch the time on the microwave. The coffee maker groans, beans caught in its stomach like grape pits. It moans out an aroma, the heavy smell of coffee that wafts through the kitchen.

I eat a spoonful of Cheerios.

She sips her coffee. Her nurse scrubs are a sea-foam green.

I try to blink the tired out of my eyes. The Cheerios sway in the milk. I wish they'd be still.

Byron appears from the great room, yawning, his backpack sliding off both shoulders. His vest is crooked, his pants are wrinkled, and he generally appears like he slept in his uniform.

Mom shoots him a Mom-look. "You act like you work."

Byron grins. "I got an A on my math test."

"I hope you don't think you're going to school like that." She points to the door.

Byron pouts, turns on his heels, and leaves. I hear him saying, "But they were ironed."

I finish off my cereal, leave it on the table, and run upstairs to help my brother get ready. He can't do anything without help, but I don't mind, not really, and by the time we're back downstairs the clock shows 6:45 A.M. "We gotta go."

I put away the milk and cereal, rinse out my bowl and shove it in the dishwasher. The toaster dings and the Pop-Tart springs out. I grab it with two paper towels and hand it to Byron.

"Bye Mom."

She watches us both. “Bye. Drive safely.”

I nudge Byron out of the kitchen and to the front door. “Today, you learn to drive.”

He grins.

*

There’s a milky aftertaste in my mouth, and I linger outside the lunchroom on the first floor of the school building, holding a can of Sprite. I’ve still got time before class, and I don’t feel like sitting in Abner’s class.

The doors to the gym open and a flood of light rolls out like a red carpet. Who should appear but my beloved, my hazel-eyed beauty, my Shanti, making school worth it, making eight o’clock classes worth it, making government worth it. Mary Elizabeth, her sidekick, tall and toned, follows behind her, but it’s Shanti who notices me standing by the lunchroom door. She waves, and I wave with the Sprite in my hand, nearly spilling sixty-five cents worth of caffeine. I close my eyes. The beauty approaches.

“Hi, Lincoln.”

“Morning.” I have perfected a casual stance. It is my one and only redeeming quality, my one and only entry into cool. I lean against the doorframe. “Practice?”

She laughs. “Always?” The lace shorts she wears show off her thighs, beautifully crafted, something Michelangelo would have done if Michelangelo had lived long enough to craft such perfection.

“Cool. You always work hard, even in the off season.” I’m fucking smooth today.

Mary Elizabeth waves at me from her place by the gym door. She turns around and says something to a girl behind her. Seems like she’s always busy.

“We have to keep in shape. And since the basketball team hogs the gym during the

afternoon, we squeeze in an extra practice in the morning.”

“I could take care of that. I’m in with the principal. He’s my cousin.” We have two principals, both white, male and female.

She gets the joke and laughs. “Got it. I might take you up on that.”

Mary Elizabeth approaches, and Shanti turns to go. “See you later.”

I open my eyes. Shanti is nowhere in sight and the daydream is over. The gym door swings back and forth, just to remind me of the emptiness.

*

There is no Maes in pre-calculus. There is no Clover. $2x + y = 876(x + y + z)$, solve for Y where X is me, the classroom is Z, and there is no Maes to be found.

Abner gawks at me and scoots his lips to one side. He’s thinking, *I gave you one task to do—one task—and that was to persuade my snarkest student to come back to class and you couldn’t do it. You couldn’t do it. What are you good for, Brown, if you can’t do the one favor your teacher asks you to do?*

What was I supposed to do? Tie her up and bring her to class? Rat her out to her parents—*your daughter isn’t sick-sick. She’s lovesick, guilt-sick.* I wish I could explain to you, sir, the reasons behind why Maes, your snarkest student, my comedic sidekick—or is she the lead and me the side?—isn’t here. But I can’t very well interrupt class, stand up, and tell you that Maes fucked Avery, Avery fucked Maes, that things have gone from complicated to plain fucked-up.

You don’t think that this is a problem for me as well? You don’t think that I’m not worried that these two haven’t resolved this, that things are ugly and growing uglier and that I still have hundreds of dollars to earn before we go to AX and a little over a month to do it? That

I'm tired? That my hands hurt? That even Jesus has an off day on Sundays?

The bell rings louder than it's supposed to ring. Abner beckons me to the front of the class as my classmates leave, and I comply, notebook in hand, backpack stuck to one shoulder.

"Well, what's the verdict?" He erases a section of the whiteboard, then leans against his desk to have a better view of me.

That's not enough time to come up with the right answer. "I gave her the work."

He scans the room. He readdresses me. "But you didn't bring her back. I thought you two were buddy-buddy."

"She's not feeling too hot, Mr. Abner."

"That so?"

Yes, that's exactly so. Spring fever. "I'm sorry, but I have to go or I'll be late for my next class. I'll try to persuade her to come to class on Wednesday." Reflexively, I give a quick bow, regret it, then rush from the classroom.

I run into Avery at the entrance of our American History class. She stares up at me.

"Maes?"

I shake my head no. A classmate squeezes between us and through the door. I step back.

"Oh." Avery watched her feet. The weather's gotten even warmer, warm enough for Southerners, raised with the expectation of heat, to wear sandals to class. The ones that Avery wears are bright blue and dotted with orange flowers.

Her hair's done up in the Witch Hunter Robin style, two ponytails stuck out on either side of her head, bound by what might be Chinese finger traps. I try to focus on that. "She'll be back soon."

I glance at the door. Miss Dubois stacks papers. She's not peeking our way, but I know

she's listening. She's always listening.

"Come on," I say, and because Avery seems this sad and confused, I offer her my hand.

She doesn't take it, and I'm oddly relieved. Oddly terrified. She backs away from me.

"I can't."

"Avery."

"McAllister and Brown, class is starting." Miss Dubois peers at us over her frameless glasses.

"I'm sorry, Link." Avery hoists her bag up her shoulder. She spins away from me and rushes down the hallway.

I grip the doorframe and watch. A half inch of door space—the section of the world that separates the carpeted classroom from the linoleum hallway—is all that stops me from going after Avery. I glance back at Miss Dubois.

Miss Dubois stares at me.

I go to my seat. I avoid my classmates. I avoid their eyes. I pretend not to notice the sadness in Miss Dubois's voice when she asks, urgently, "Brown?"

Here, I answer her.

*

I avoid eating with Mitchell. To eat with him is to have to explain where Maes and Avery have been hiding lately. I can't answer that question. I eat lunch outside, out back on the lawn where the seniors and the art kids and the kids who skip class eat. Somehow, I blend in. Not with the seniors or the art kids or the kids who skip class or the naked, stone cherubs that turn their naked asses toward me from my place on the bench, like the Red Mountain statue of Vulcan, God of Fire, with his iron ass turned toward Mountain Brook, a middle finger to the rich.

I blend in with the quiet. With the buzzing bee and the blowing wind.

I try to remember if Yusuke and the gang from *YuYu Hakusho* ever had lunch. One of those quintessential Japanese lunches, the kind you see in almost every slice of life manga and anime, where third years eat on school rooftops, lawsuits waiting to happen, one bad decision from jumping over, from getting the shit beat out of them, from fucking their girlfriends.

None of that ever actually happens on Japanese rooftops. Instead, friends share lunches. Girls make bentos for their boyfriends, turn themselves into master chefs through error and trial and cut fingers. Guys smoke on rooftops—not pot but cigarettes. I don't think there's a scene like that in *YuYu Hakusho*. I don't think Yusuke and Kuwabara and Keiko ever have that moment where they peer over the barbed railing of the roof, see the bright blue sky, and think, what's next?

My chicken nuggets taste like shit. There is no Maes, there is no Avery, and, God, I hate to think I have to rely solely on Mitchell.

*

At 3:25, I wait outside of Avery's art history class. Only, I don't want people to think I'm waiting for Avery or that I'm waiting for anything, so I stand four doors down on the opposite side of the hall and watch the crowds pass. When the door pops open and the art historians come out, bobbing and weaving, talking about Duchamp and nudes and stairwells, I don't see Avery. I leave.

By the time I go to the art room, Avery's already there and Mitchell, too. Avery looks like Usagi from *Sailor Moon*, in that episode where, after finally getting somewhere with Mamoru, her lover from a faraway past, after finally sorting out the past from the present, Mamoru dumps her, Usagi winds up in a telephone booth gripping her sailor fuku, sliding to the floor, blue eyes a

level-five flood.

That's exactly who Avery seems like.

"What?" I ask. I stare at Mitchell who stares right back at me.

"That's what I wanted to ask you." He's got his hand around Avery's arm. It's not supposed to be funny, but it is, because Mitchell is four times her size and at least a foot taller. He acts like the principal. He acts like her brother. He acts like her boyfriend.

Avery seems like she's taken one of her Copic markers—bougainvillea—and inked in devastation. She tugs at her arm.

"Hey, calm down, man." I try to grab Mitchell's arm, but he moves away from me.

He questions Avery. "What the fuck is going on around here? Where's Maes at?"

"Chill. You're hurting Avery."

"You running this now?"

"I'm not running shit. Calm down."

Avery has stopped struggling. She's stopped moving. She's stopped being the center we rely on.

Mitchell let's her go. "We're supposed to study Spanish today, remember?"

Avery shakes her head. "No hoy."

"¿Por qué no?" he asks.

That nearly kills me, too, Mitchell speaking Spanish in his southern accent.

Avery shakes her head no. She squeezes in between us and runs for the door.

I start to follow her, not to catch her, I don't think. Mitchell grabs my shoulder, and I shrug him off.

"Where the hell is Maes?"

“Why’re you asking me? Ask Maes.”

“Thought you were a pair.”

I go around him and into the storage room. I pull out our fake money jar, unscrew the cap, and drop in a few fake bills.

“Things got weird last week. That’s the last I saw of Maes.” I don’t owe him an explanation, I don’t owe him *anything*. I shove the money jar into his hand and run out after Avery.

I’m barely out the door before I hear Mitchell lumbering behind me. I spot Avery slipping out the first set of double doors, the set that separates the classrooms from the offices, and I follow behind her and Mitchell follows behind me. To my surprise, Avery doesn’t go out the front door. She stops and turns to me.

“Yamete!” Her voice is a sonic boom. It echoes through the halls and the few lingering students stop and stare. I know we’ll be talked about tomorrow. I know we’ll be talked about today.

Mitchell grabs us by the arms. I snatch my arm away, but follow him as he tugs Avery back through the double doors. We go on like this, Mitchell, Avery, and I, until we reach the door that lets us out into the back of the school.

Mitchell shuts the door behind us then sits down on one of the stone benches. He pulls Avery down on a bench beside him, and I stand, watching them both.

He shakes Avery by the arm. “Talk. Yell. Goddammit, do something.” He throws down her hand like he’s throwing dice.

Avery holds onto her wrist and doesn’t say anything.

I want to tell her that everything’s going to be fine. That she doesn’t have to say anything.

That I understand why she yelled and that we can all forget about this and go home. But, like so many times in my life, I don't say what I'm thinking. I don't say anything at all.

"It's my fault." Avery grips the edge of her seat. "I'm why Maes isn't here."

"Avery, it's okay."

"Shut up, Brown."

"Make me, Harris."

"I did it. I did it." Avery bounces on her seat like a child in a fit, like a child who's been told she isn't going to the park but to the dentist instead. She shakes her head, wildly, and her hair whips from side to side. Her Witch Hunter Robin hairstyle unravels itself; her Chinese finger trap ties slide off.

"I got stressed out, you know, Lincoln? With the drawings for the art festival and studying for Spanish." She says my name but she turns toward Mitchell. She shakes her head side to side as if to say no, no, no. "I got stressed. I wanted a little break. Because my Aunt Shannon has been hard on me lately. She watches me all the time and she takes me to all these places—saying what a good McAllister I am and how she's proud of me and I can't take it. I can't take it. I couldn't take it. All those people that I don't like and Aunt Shannon that I don't like and worrying about failing Spanish and then we can't go to AX." She mashes her palms into her eyes. "I can't take it."

Mitchell reaches out for her, hesitant as someone about to touch the sun. Avery must feel his heat. She pulls away from him.

"No," she says. "No."

Mitchell balls his fist. Mitchell Harris flares his nostrils. He seems ready to scream. "This is why you haven't been around? What the hell, Avery? This is all?"

And the *all*, I think, pushes Avery over the limit. She throws her body forward off the bench and slams her hand into the grass in front of her. She beats the ground after every word. “I slept with Maes.”

When a sun explodes, silence follows. We’re all quiet. It only lasts a second—no, three-and-one-half seconds—but you can feel its effects. The melting away of everything. I don’t want to do it, but I know I have to check Mitchell. I know I have to see the damage this has done.

I remember when we all went to Avery’s house. We went to Avery’s room and she showed us her doll collection—hundreds of dolls costing thousands of dollars. Well-dressed dolls, beautiful, even, in their craftsmanship. But I remember Mitchell and I both thinking they were eerie things.

Mitchell’s eyes now are as vacant as those dolls.

*

Here’s a story:

Our seats are lined up imperfectly, the desks are too small. There are cheaply laminated pre-calculus posters my underpaid teacher probably made while he was seated behind his sturdy black desk, a marker in one hand and a cup of something that might be Coke plus Red Bull plus coffee, might be beer in the other—I can’t tell, the mug is too dark. I am in the center of the universe. And even though I’m in the center of the universe, smack dead in the center of this classroom, I’m not feeling very much like a center, never mind the bright fluorescent light wheezing at me, illuminating my black skin and old-penny eyes. I want a classroom with a better view. I want to gaze out lazily over the horizon and see a black notebook falling from the sky.

The Asian girl in front of me has the body of an eleven-year-old boy. Her limbs are long as the time between manga chapter releases, and there are no fat rolls poking out from the space

in her chair. That's what I notice first about her, what's been making me stare. Everyone should have fat rolls. They're essential, like a smile or two eyes or an opinion on Alabama football. But she's straight up and down, like one of Lee So-Young's characters.

I don't see her much outside of class, this one and French II, except once, when I saw her on the stairs leading up to the school. Her long brown hair curls around her chest and blocks out her face and I wonder to myself how she can possibly be that sad with such animated hair. I never speak to her, and if she notices me she doesn't say a word and I haven't developed some kind of crush on the skinny Asian in front of me and I never will and I never could. But it feels kind of like when you go to a place often, like a bank or a bookstore or a Food Giant or some place and there's always this one character there—that guy selling suckers from his wheelchair or the bald black woman with the intricate neck tattoo. She's like one of those people. Eyesuckers, I call them, because you can't not see them. It started with her back and now it's moved up to her hair and now I'm even freaking myself out.

She drops her scented cheeseburger-shaped eraser and I pick it up for her. She turns around.

Her face is nothing spectacular. She's got two eyes, brown as kiwi skins, a nose, and huge, chalk eyebrows. Her lips are as plump and pink as plums. Soft, pillowy lips. That's her stand out.

She takes the eraser and turns back around in her seat. "Thanks."

I do her a favor and she gives me a dry thanks?

A dry eraser flies over my head and hits the guy behind me.

"Matt, are you paying any attention at all?" Mr. Abner asks the guy. Mr. Abner isn't a terrible teacher because he throws erasers at your head. He's a terrible teacher because he spends

half his time talking about functions and the other half telling us that past a certain age deodorant is no longer optional, and that once you roll it on you've rolled it on forever; your body will no longer de-funk on its own.

“I was listening.”

“I'm trying to teach you math. You may think you don't need it but you will. It has many practical applications. Every time you go to the Galleria and try to figure out what twenty-one percent off is, that's math. One day, assuming you pass my class, you're going to want to buy a house.”

I want to head-desk right now. But I'm in front of Matt and if I make any sudden movement I become an easy target. I've found that the best way to stay out of trouble—to avoid fights, political and ethical debates, answering questions in class, wondering if the preacher is talking about you—is to stay quiet and keep my head low. See nothing, hear nothing, and say nothing. I firmly believe in those three monkeys. When I see Kid A reading Kid B's paper, I don't say anything. When the teacher asks Matt if he's paying attention, I pretend that I am.

“Why would anyone mark something down twenty-one percent?” It's the skinny Asian.

“What?” asks Mr. Abner.

Skinny Asian speaks slowly. “Why would anyone mark something down twenty-one percent? Why not say twenty percent? The one percent doesn't make a significant price change.”

“Now we're getting into politics,” Mr. Abner says. “And this is not political science nor is it economics. Functions work like this.”

And boom, we're back on topic.

This is my second memory of Maes. I noticed her once on the steps, during the first few weeks of class, and didn't notice her again until days later, until she shut down Abner.

It's what I like about Maes, her ability to remain calm, her ability to diffuse bodies like bombs. She works quickly, swiftly, so that by the time you've realized what's going on it's already too late—you're a calmer, better person.

It's what I miss about her right now. If she were here with me, in this empty courtyard, she could tell me what I could have done to prevent this catastrophe. Maes isn't the type of person to watch an explosion; she either sets off bombs or diffuses them.

It's no secret that Maes is a lesbian. I know it, Avery knows it, Mitchell knows it. It's a tiny elephant in the room. Maes has never said anything about it—she's never stood up in the middle of one of our trading sessions and announced, "I'm gay." And I guess she shouldn't have to, for the same reason Mitchell doesn't stand up and say he's got freckles or Avery doesn't stand up and say she's rich and I don't stand up and say I'm black. But I wonder. If she'd said it, if we'd had time to think about it, would things be different? Maybe we could have avoided this. Maybe Avery wouldn't have clung to Maes as much, touching her and holding her hand and snuggling in the back of Mitchell's pickup as we searched for prostitutes. Or maybe—and this is more likely—maybe Mitchell wouldn't be with us. Maybe he would have left us all, maybe he would have cursed out Maes, called her something he couldn't take back.

I lie on the grass. I know I should head to work, but I can't. I reach into my pocket, pull out my cell phone, and text Myrtle. I tell her, as politely as I can through text, that I'm going to be a little bit late. Friend emergency, I say. Myrtle will understand.

Mitchell and Avery are gone. Mitchell left first, not a word, not even a misplaced breath. Avery waited something like three minutes before she did the same. Left with no words, left me with silence.

I consider my options. I could call Maes. She'll have to come to school tomorrow,

anyway, because even Alabama cares if you miss this many consecutive school days. But if I call her I'll have to tell her what Avery said. I'll have to tell her that Mitchell didn't curse us out. He didn't blow up at us, he didn't push or shove. He imploded. And that's bad, implosions are bad, because we can't collect the pieces of an implosion. With explosions I can see what pieces fell where: pride, to the left of the stone bench, and hurt, to the right of the cherub, and heart, torn up and discarded at Avery's feet.

I could go after Avery. It's probably not too late to catch her if I run. But what do I say if I catch her? It's all right that you fucked Maes? It's all right that you have, not literally but something close, fucked with Maes? I can't say that.

I won't go after Mitchell. There's nothing I can do for Mitchell.

I sit up. I smell honeysuckles, light and sweet, the scent of my childhood. In elementary school, we'd go down to the field behind school and suck the honey from the flowers. Nobody does that in high school. From where I'm sitting, petals peek out from beneath the stone bench in front of me. I pull a flower.

I tear out the middle even though I'm too afraid to eat it.

*

I'm an hour late for work. Myrtle is understanding. She's got the desk fan on, whirling on high, so she yells at me over the mowing sound it makes.

"Friends are important! Don't get your panties in a bunch worrying about me!"

I nod. "Thanks." I slip behind the counter and through the door that leads into the storage room. I drop my backpack, take a breath, and join Myrtle back at the front.

Myrtle's moved Alisa, the Fender Mustang, to the front, behind the counter. The counter isn't as well lit as the rest of the place, and Alisa hangs on a wall mount, catching the dull yellow

of the light bulbs and the green glint of the carpet. The colors give her a gothic, green glow.

“The owner came in today.”

Myrtle clicks down the fan one notch. Alisa shines.

“I decided to move it up front so he could see it. Thought it might motivate him to get the money.”

The owner only has one day left. I go over to the front counter and open a drawer under the register. I locate my time card—which is really an old spreadsheet Myrtle prints off Excel—and write in my time. Four-thirty-two. I was supposed to be in by four-fifteen today, not because Myrtle needs me, especially, but because every little minute is one half-dollar closer to AX.

“I do wonder what kind of emergency you had,” Myrtle says. She turns the fan; we both have a little air. “But I’ll just ask if your friends are okay.”

I don’t know how to define “okay.” Nobody’s dead. “Thanks. You don’t have to worry.”

She doesn’t. She talks about one of the Teds, her old husband, and how she knew their divorce was inevitable when he confessed to preferring the drums to the guitar. I nod on, politely, but my head’s not really in the conversation. I’m still worried about Avery and Maes, and as much as I hate to admit it, Mitchell.

I don’t want to think about any of them, not right now. I put on my name lanyard—the only indication that I work here—dust off the glass countertop that holds our more expensive equipment and I vacuum the floor for lint and skin cells and dandruff. Vacuuming is always kind of a dance for me because the shop is small. The vacuum has an actual vacuum bag, and every two minutes I have to glance down to make sure it hasn’t come loose and spilled dust everywhere.

Myrtle talks throughout my entire cleaning session, and I’m glad for it, even if I’m not

paying too much attention to what she says. A few customers trickle in by the time I put the vacuum up, two guys my age examining amps and a girl inspecting an electric bass. One of the guys, tall and thin as me but with a confidence that seems more Percy, cuts me off before I help the girl. He goes on and on about basses and which ones are better and which ones would be perfect for her. The girl, already versed in bass—her hands are cracked, her calluses are craters—keeps her lips shut. She lets the guy talk and when he’s done, when he thinks he’s got her, she thanks him for his time, sidesteps him, and goes straight to a Jaguar. The guy gapes; his friend laughs. Myrtle laughs. The girls ignore them all.

“Seven hundred,” I say. “We throw in an extra pair of strings.”

“Awesome.” She tucks her hair behind her ears. Her ears are cut square. “I’ll be back for it, maybe.”

The girl leaves and the guys, after she’s gone, buy their amp. The rest of my day goes like this. Customers, cleaning, chatting. I do homework when Myrtle leaves to grab her dinner and dust off Alisa when I’m done. Mostly though, I’m grateful for not having to think. I’m grateful for being busy. So when nine o’clock finally comes and I sign out on my timesheet I feel dread. Absolute dread.

*

I catch a glimpse of Avery by her locker well before the bell rings. She’s already walking away by the time I register it’s her, and I don’t bother getting her attention. I see Mitchell on my way to chemistry. He’s got his hands tucked into the pockets of his Tide sweatshirt. He’s got his backpack on both shoulders and a few books wedged under one armpit. He doesn’t see me and from the appearance of it, he doesn’t see much of anyone or anything. His face says he’s taken a test he knows none of the answers to. I duck down a bit and slip into my classroom.

Noah is already sitting down in front of our lab table. He's got a pencil in one hand and last night's homework in the other. I don't sit on my stool; I fall onto it.

"Am I supposed to ask what's wrong?" Noah erases a three on his paper then draws another three on top of it, neater. He never uses the pencil eraser; he's got a separate pink one.

"No." I'm two inches away from putting my head on the lab table when I remember that we dissected frogs in January, pig in February, and experimented with acid last week. I sit up straight.

Noah's not the kind of guy I can ask for advice. We're friends, sure, in that we're chemistry partners and that we're both pretty good at chemistry and that we can depend on each other for notes. And yeah, we're a little closer now that I'm teaching him guitar—he's way too showy. If he could sit still, he might do all right—but I can't very well ask him what to do with a lesbian, a redneck, and a sun that aren't speaking to one another.

"Turn in your homework?" He holds out his hand.

I unzip my backpack, pull out last night's homework and hand it to him. He gets off the stool.

"Whatever it is, don't worry."

I zip up my backpack.

"It's May." He walks toward the front of the room. "We're almost done." He gets stopped along the way. Amber, one of Shanti's teammates, reaches over her lab partner and places her homework into Noah's hand. He slows down for her. She smiles at him.

Class begins. We do experiments. We record our findings in our logs. We experiment some more. We record. Class is over. Government follows. I get the gist of what we're talking about—Greenetrack, electronic bingo, corruption charges, Senator Scott Beason calling his black

constituents “aborigines.” My classmates talk about Alabama’s state constitution—the largest one in the world, apparently, so large that you can’t request a paper copy—and the antiquated laws and language it uses. Six sockless people in a room is considered an orgy. Incest is legal; Maes’s love is not.

Class ends.

Maes is in French class. When I enter, she’s standing at Madame Beaumont’s desk. She’s handing in her assignments—a stack of paper that she didn’t receive from me, must have gotten from someone else. I slow down my steps.

“J’espère que vous te sens mieux.” Madame Beaumont makes everything a lesson.

“Oui,” Maes says.

Madame Beaumont dismisses her, and Maes and I cross between the rows. We sit at our desks. She turns to me. Her demeanor is exactly the same, as if she hasn’t been absent at all.

“Later,” I say.

She’s surprised. I’m not the one who usually arranges any kind of meeting. I’m the one that listens. I’m the one that follows. But she doesn’t ask questions. She nods her head, a single nod. She turns in her seat.

Before I realize it, I hold onto her wrist. She stops mid-turn. From behind her, I can see classmates entering, classmates heading our way. I have to be quick.

Her skin feels soft. “Don’t meet in the art room. Meet me at my car.”

She has on her teacher gaze. The tilt of the head, the tight lips, the long stare. I don’t mean to, but I notice her lips and I wonder if Avery noticed it too, how the right side of her mouth is slightly more upturned than the left. In music, I’d call it a good a variation. Pieces played straight are boring; variation adds character.

“Okay.”

She has to know what this means. Something’s wrong. She has to know that what I mean is, don’t talk to Mitchell and Avery. Talk to me. I let go of her wrist and she turns back facing the front of the classroom. It’s because I haven’t touched many girls that the softness lingers. That I wonder if Avery felt this soft, too.

*

There aren’t any rules for this one. There’s no set-in-stone way to tell Maes that Mitchell knows and that Avery is caving in on herself. The only thing I can think to do is to bring Maes to my car, roll the windows up, and tell her.

That’s what I do. I tell her that Avery told Mitchell and that Mitchell shut down.

Maes has one hand on the door handle, the other on the dash. Her head bobs between her shoulder blades, and I can’t see her face through her hair. Maybe she’s crying, but if she is, I can’t hear it. Maybe she’s imploding, but if she is, I can’t feel it. She moves her hand from the dash and presses it—balled up fist, wrist—against her stomach, the way people hold in an upchuck.

A white Durango drives by in front of us. The parking lot, full a whole eleven minutes ago, is down to half capacity. The Durango sends up a Mario-level dust cloud as it leaves, and I watch the heat waves ripple through.

Maes opens the car door. She climbs out and I follow.

She’s not crying. Her face is dry. She’s not heaving, she’s not going to upchuck. She pulls her messenger bag from my car and shuts the door.

I could tell her it’s going to be all right, that Avery will forgive her—because really, really Avery will forgive Maes. And one day, eventually, Maes will forgive Avery. But then I’d have to

account for Mitchell. I'd have to tell her that Mitchell Harris is okay with two women fucking, one he likes and one he might have, one day, loved. I'll have to tell her that the secret's out, the unspoken, obvious, barely veiled truth is out: you love Avery, Mitchell loves Avery, Avery loves everyone.

Her back is a slight thing by the time she's at the bottom of the steps. I don't know what she's going back for, and I don't ask. She climbs the steps and I can almost hear her counting: one, two, three.

*

Maes, Mitchell, and Avery don't meet in the art room on Wednesday. I'm the only one there, and I use the free time to study. I've got final exams coming up in a week, and between working and trying to diffuse our sex scandal, I haven't had any time to study. I begin with pre-calculus because it's the easiest. Formulas don't change and I like that. Either you know what you're doing or not. History is the same way. Bully Connor blocked James Wood from entering the University of Alabama on June 11, 1963, and John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963. Either you know these dates or you don't.

Thursday is more of the same. No Maes, no Avery, no Mitchell. Myrtle has given me more off days during the week so that I can study for my exams, and instead of going home I sit on one of the art tables and memorize chemical equations, learn of another Dylan, Thomas, different but like Dylan, Bob. I review notes from government—Scott Beason says I'm an aborigine, Cooper Green will probably close, Stockton, CA, has filed for the largest city bankruptcy and that's still eight times less than the debt for Jefferson County, my county.

Friday is the same. I don't worry about my music test—I know how to play. I squeeze in French. I can conjugate but I can't remember all the words. I need someone to study with. I

wonder if Shanti would listen. Then, Psychology. I don't think Freud is funny anymore. I don't think he's wrong when he hypothesizes that every other thought is sexual: Maes and Avery, Avery and Maes, Shanti. This art room is freezing. I don't find it funny anymore. I don't find anything funny anymore. I shut the book and leave for work. Fridays are fair game and Myrtle will let me study in between customers.

I'm at work for two hours before I break. A customer asks me about the difference between a flat top and an arch top and I stupidly answer *a flat has more midrange*. I correct myself and then elaborate, and the customer doesn't seem to mind the misstep, but the damage is done. I know my head isn't here. I know I can't pay attention to my work. I pull off my name badge and place it on the counter. Myrtle disregards her magazine.

"I need to leave." I swallow. "Please." I can hear the urgency in my own voice. I can feel my eyes getting big. I'm a disaster away from a panic attack. "Please."

Myrtle waves her magazine toward the door. "Go on. Don't worry about it." Her smile says she's scared for me.

I nod my head in thanks. I grab my backpack from the back and leave. I don't even perform my new ritual. I don't say good bye to Alisa.

I know I should have said something to Maes. She was waiting on me, I think, to say something to comfort her. To tell her that what's happened isn't her fault. But I didn't say any of those things to her. I let her walk away. And even though I know I no longer have the right to tell her much of anything, I can't stop myself from driving to Forest Park and knocking on the front door of her *Alice-in-Wonderland* house.

Maes answers the door. It's seven o'clock on a Friday night. Maes is already wearing her pajamas—an oversized Sailor Moon t-shirt and a pair of pajama pants that come to her knees.

Her hair's tied in a ponytail—it's weird, because she hardly ever wears it any way but down. Another new Maes, and she's got one hand on the doorknob, one hand on the doorframe.

“It's late,” I say. I shake my head a little. “I mean, I know it's late. And I didn't call.”

I know it's silly, but before I visited her the other day, I didn't think Maes could cry. Maes has always been the together one, the pragmatic one. She's not like Avery, trying hard to be that kind of person—a Genki Girl*, a center—and she's not like Mitchell even though Mitchell, as much as I can't stand to admit it, is as smart as Maes. But Mitchell blows up at things. Mitchell gets angry in a loud, violent way. At least he did until what happened to Avery and Maes. And Maes isn't like me—I don't think she gives two fucks what other people think about her—stoic, lesbian, other. I don't think anybody's opinion of Maes matters any more than Maes's opinion of herself. I'll have to forgive myself for not believing that Maes gets sad, that Maes cries, that Maes has as many feelings as anybody else. Only, she's hiding it better.

But not now. Her eyes are swollen big as lemons. Her irises are pink and white, speckled like an Easter egg. There's a salty streak down her cheeks.

Maybe crying isn't the right word. Maybe bawling's better.

I want to ask if I can come in, but she doesn't give me the chance. She steps outside and pulls the door shut behind her. She fold her arms across her chest—she's not wearing a bra, but on Maes, that hardly matters—and she staggers to one of the white iron porch chairs and sits. I sit with her.

It's cool outside. I knot my hands together and let them hang by my knees. Maes curls her feet around one of the chair legs, sits back, and holds onto the chair arms like she's steeling herself up for a punch.

It's clear that I'm the one who has to talk. I've been here for five minutes and she hasn't

said a word, not a single word. I speak. “I’m sorry.”

This isn’t what she wants to hear and I know it. She needs more than a sorry.

“I don’t think this is your fault.”

The skin under her eyes is bruised red.

“I don’t think it’s anybody’s fault.”

“It’s Mitchell’s fault.”

I sit back in my chair. That’s not what I expected. “How?” I’m not going to defend Mitchell. I just need to know how.

“I wouldn’t have done it if he’d asked Avery.” She leans in on her right side. “I know he likes her.”

It’s no more a secret that Mitchell likes Avery than it is that Maes likes her.

“I’m not stupid. I know Avery doesn’t like girls.”

I glance at the door. I wonder, for the first time, where her parents are. Are they listening? Can they even hear us?

“But Mitchell, he had a chance. But he never took it.” She corrects her lean. She sits straight, her back right up against the chair’s back. “I kept thinking that if I had the chance, I’d take it. So I did.”

I know I should speak here, but I don’t know what to say. But I also know there’s a time limit. I lean in toward Maes, put my hand on the table that separates us—it’s cold, and it scrapes the concrete when I lean on it—and speak. “That doesn’t make you a horrible person.”

“I know.”

“Good.”

“But I’d do it again. I’ve been thinking that if you gave me this exact situation again, I’d

still choose Avery.” She doesn’t cry. “Even though it’ll hurt her.”

“Why Avery?”

“Why Shanti?”

Because when I think of her I improve. I’m a better person. I’m a happier person.

Because she’s as passionate about volleyball as I am about guitar. Because I don’t know why.

“I think I love myself more than Avery.”

“I think that’s okay. It’s self-preservation.”

She smiles at me. “Look at you. Biology paid off.”

I smile back. “I’m saying what I think.”

She moves to the edge of her seat and places her hands on top of mine. The color contrast is obvious. Cloud white and gravel black. Her hands practically glow in the moonlight. She squeezes my hand, and this is the closest I’ve ever been to a girl. I’ve been hugged by Avery—I’ve felt the press of her breasts and the leanness of her arms—but this, this right here, is the closest I’ve ever been to a girl.

“I know you want to help, Lincoln,” she says, “but I don’t think you can with this one.”

My skin tingles. I feel the air on my arms and face. I blink slowly at Maes.

“I can’t talk to Avery and Mitchell right now. So don’t expect to see me in the art room.”

“Come on, Maes. You know Avery’s not really mad at you. She’s a little shy about it.” I say this like I mean it but I really don’t know. Avery’s as confusing as Maes is right now. I don’t know if she’s hurt or angry or embarrassed.

“And Mitchell?”

We’ll work on Mitchell. If he’s survived this whole year without fighting with me then there’s no way he won’t accept Maes. There’s no way. “Don’t worry about him. He’s an asshole,

anyway.”

Maes lets go of my hand. She stands, and she’s a giant. Tall and sturdy, things I don’t often think about when we’re in the art room or in pre-calculus or eating fair food at an art walk.

She folds her arms back across her chest. Because it’s cool, her nipples are hard through her shirt. Her feet make a slapping sound against the pavement. She’s nearly to the door before I stand.

“Come on, Maes.” Don’t stop coming to the art room. Talk to Mitchell and Avery. Don’t leave me alone. Don’t leave me alone.

“Don’t stop working,” she says. She opens up her front door and steps through. She shuts the door. There’s no good night.

*

Maes doesn’t respond to my text messages. I sent out a “Hey” at eleven, a “What’s up at?” noon, and a “Maes,” at one, but nothing gets through to her.

Dad makes lunch. Chili cheese enchiladas for me, Byron, Percy, and him. He works on the chicken. He peppers and salts it before scooping it up and dropping it into one of our skilletts. He goes to the sink, rinses his hands with soap and water, then returns to the stove. He puts the skillet over the back eye and drizzles in the olive oil that Mom keeps in an old Verdi bottle.

I turn my phone in my hands. I squeeze the back cover to make sure it’s locked on tight then flip the phone around.

Dad flips the chicken. Grease sizzles onto the stovetop, and he twists the knob down to medium-high.

“Do you work today?”

“No,” I say. After ditching Myrtle yesterday, she called to say that I should take today off

too. She says that I need time to fix whatever's going on with me. She says she gets it. This means more hours for me in June. More sleepless nights.

He uses a fork to turn the chicken. From where I'm sitting at the table, I can't tell if it's browned or not.

"I need the green and chipotle chili chopped. And the onions."

I set down my phone, stand, and wash my hands in the sink. I wipe them on a dishrag before I go to the fridge and pull out the chilies and the onions, one hiding behind a bag of tomatoes, one hiding behind a bottle of Sunny D. I grab the garlic even though he doesn't ask for it.

"Are you talking to your mom yet?"

"We never stopped talking." I pull a plate from one of the top cabinets and a knife from one of the drawers. I have to jiggle the knob to force the drawer to slide back in right. Dad's been saying he's going to fix it, but I know it's at the bottom of his list, way after he hangs up Mom's new curtain rods and uses the carpet cleaner to remove a spaghetti stain Byron made in front of the TV.

"I mean *really talking*." He lifts one chicken thigh then sets it back down.

I stand beside him and cut. I don't like using knives—I don't like using anything that could damage my fingers—and I slice carefully. I slice, and don't cut, more like a saw than an ax.

"Dreaming is tough," Dad says. He sprinkles spices onto the chicken and stirs. "People tell you that you can be anything and then the whole world pushes you down." He moves the skillet from the heat.

I wonder what the world has told him, what dream he's had and lost. I slice a little faster

as he pulls out the chicken. The blade clicks against the cutting board.

“I want to see you get the things you’re willing to fight for. That’s why I set up these conditions, you understand?” You can go to AX if you earn enough for you and your brother. Those were the conditions.

I understand.

He reaches over me and grabs the chilies I have sliced—the chipotle ones—and drops them in the chicken fat and oil of the skillet. I finish up on the other chili, and he tosses it in too. He takes the onion from the counter and peels off the outer layer. When it’s off, he sits it on the counter and chops, something Mom has told him not to do.

I mince garlic. Fantasies don’t hurt you. Dreams don’t hurt you. But the real world, that’s something scary. I need to believe that I’ll meet Go Igarashi. I need to believe that Maes, Avery, Mitchell, and I will go to California. If I didn’t believe these things then what would I have? School and panic attacks? A mediocre life in a mediocre town?

The smell of garlic gets caught in my nose, and I almost sneeze, but Dad beats me to it. He turns his head and sneezes into his shoulder. He blinks his eyes one, two, three, then goes back to the onions, and I appreciate that his back is turned to me. I appreciate that he doesn’t ask too much of me.

I toss the garlic into the skillet and he tosses in the onions and sets the whole thing on the back eye. He dials the heat to medium.

“Why don’t you work today?” He stirs the mix up with a wooden spoon. The spoon scrapes against the bottom of the pan. Mom hates when he does that. Says it wears off the Teflon.

“Myrtle gave me the day off.” I’m grateful for the change of topic. I carry the chopping utensils and plate over to the sink. I plug up the sink’s right side and run dishwasher.

He shreds the chicken—browned, peppered, salted—and places it into the skillet. “How much?”

I don’t say anything, not because I don’t understand the question. I don’t say anything because for the first time it’s dawned on me that if Avery, Maes, and Mitchell don’t make up by July then we won’t be going to Anime Expo.

Speak. “Close.” I drop the dishes into the sink, everything but the knife. The knife, I squirt with dish soap and wash carefully, alone. When it’s done, I scrub the other dishes as quickly as I can, rinse off my hands, and wipe them on a clean dishcloth.

“Don’t let Percy eat all the enchiladas.” I pluck my phone from the kitchen table. I flip it over and rouse it from sleep mode. No missed calls. “I’m heading out.”

I hear him call my name but I’m already halfway down the hallway, enough to play stupid. The front door opens as I reach it, and Percy comes in. I walk past him and straight to my car. I can hear him calling me—there’s urgency in his voice. My name sounds like a bell. I ignore him.

If Maes won’t listen to me, then maybe Avery will.

*

I land at Avery’s shortly after two. Her house, which is really a Spanish mansion, seems even bigger without Maes and Mitchell around. I cut the engine and idle for a moment. I got lucky yesterday because Maes answered, not her parents. But with Avery, it’s different. I’ve never met her father—always, always working, I understand—and while her mother seemed nice, I’d hate to actually have to interact with her.

I send her a text. *Come outside.*

I put my phone on the console and wait. I’m going to give Avery ten minutes. Ten

minutes is as long a time as I think I can manage idling outside a mansion I don't own. I turn the music player on my phone. "Want It All Back" plays, but I hit the skip button. Steven Conte starts in with "No Reply." I glance at my phone. "Bebop Playlist."

There's movement behind an upstairs curtain. I catch it in time to see a hand. I scroll on my phone, hit play, and put the phone back on the console. I close my eyes and instrumentals play before Hyde sings "Lost Heaven."

When I open my eyes again, at the end of the song, Avery isn't standing by my car. She's sitting on the front lawn, her knees pulled up to her chest, her hair tucked behind her ears. She's not wearing her North Face jacket or her rain boots. She doesn't have on a cat ears hat. Instead, she's wearing a lace white dress that covers her chest and three-quarters of her arms. She's got on gold shoes that shine like satin slippers.

She rests her chin on top of her knees and weaves her fingers together. She peers at me with such sad eyes.

I turn on the engine, pull into drive and go. I check my rearview mirror. Avery's still sitting there, I make a U-turn at the end of the street and pull back in front of Avery, this time with the passenger side facing her. I press down on the brake, lean over, and push open the car door.

Avery gets up, comes over, and climbs inside. She shuts the door behind her and I drive. She slips off her shoes and curls her feet under her body. She a roly-poly, curled up in the corner of my car.

I take us away from Mountain Brook. I don't notice anything but the road. I don't know if there are people outside, people who are watching or judging or not giving a damn. I don't know if I should slow for pedestrians. I drive until I get to Montevallo Road, until the houses seem less

like mini mansions and more live average houses in a nice neighborhood.

Avery's stomach growls and mine responds. I haven't eaten anything but a Pop-Tart.

She's so sedated that I can barely hear her when she says, "Food."

The only thing I want right now is a bag of chips and a soda. I'm still holding out hope that Percy and Byron won't eat all of the enchiladas, that this intervention with Avery will be a quick and easy task. I pull into the grocery on Montclair and turn off the car. Avery sits up. She opens her mouth to speak but stops. She shakes her head and tucks back a lock of hair that falls out of place.

Avery follows me out of the car and I immediately know that I'm stupid. I stare at the grocery store. We're at McAllister's. Avery pulls on her shoes, shuts the car door. She stands beside me and stares at the sign, like I do when I stop watching her.

"I feel like secondhand royalty."

She smiles a little.

"Is this okay?"

She nods. I follow her into the store, a two person line.

We have two grocery options in my neighborhood: an Aldi and a Wal-Mart Marketplace. Further down the way is a Publix, but that's really a neighborhood over. I've been to this McAllister exactly once, with my cousin who lives in Crestline. It's as grand as I remember it—skylights, large aisles, and smiling employees. If shopping is a pleasure at Publix, it's an orgasm at McAllister. Avery ambles toward the frozen food aisle and I follow her. Because we're out of Mountain Brook and into Crestline, the population is tilted: half black, half white. In Alabama, being with Avery will always get me stares. But here, it's a judgmental I can deal with. A black woman, twenties I'm guessing, all but shakes her head at me. She's someone with Mom's

attitude: you couldn't date a black woman? A white kid, a little older than me, same aisle, has a slightly different reaction: you're fucking lucky.

Avery picks up a tub of Blue Bell Red Velvet Cake ice cream. I take it from her, instinctively, and she leads me to the chip and wine section, one aisle over. She grabs a bag of Sun Chips and I grab a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos. She browses the wine coolers—a margarita and sangria two-pack—but knows there's no way in hell either of us is getting that. She slips down the candy aisle and picks up a bag of Snickers, puts them down and picks up Peanut M&Ms. She grabs a box of spoons and we travel to the front and grab sodas—a Grapico for her, a Sprite for me—drop our bounty on the counter.

I pull out my card to pay for us, but she whips out hers before I can say anything. It's gold. She swipes, pays, and heads for the door, the bag holding the ice cream dangling from her fingers. I follow with the rest of our food. We buckle into the car. I drive us over to Century Plaza, the abandoned mall, and park along the edge overlooking traffic.

She works the ice cream loose with her spoon and eats. I munch on Cool Ranch chips and use my soda to swallow it all down. I wipe my hand on one of the discarded grocery bags.

“I never asked you if you were feeling better.” I take a sip of my Sprite.

“Uh huh.” She eats another spoonful of ice cream. “I'm fine.”

I know I should be patient and build up to the bigger questions. But I'm feeling desperate. “What happened?”

“You know,” she says. She slips off her shoes. “Life's being a Shannon.”

“It's got to be more than that.”

“I'm sorry about the other day. I didn't say goodbye.”

“Never mind that.”

“You know,” she says. She holds up her spoon to her mouth. “I got stressed. I was working so hard on the art show and studying Spanish. I got tired.” She eats another spoonful. “I got these headaches. Avery’s not very bright, you know. If she has to think too hard, her brain melts.”

“Stop it.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m not mad at Maes.”

“I know.”

“I’m mad at me.” Another bite. She shivers.

“Why?” I know why. She knows I know why. But it probably needs to be said, anyway.

“Maes really likes me. I shouldn’t have done that to her.” She shrugs. The ice cream bucket sweats in her lap.

“People make mistakes.”

“It wasn’t a mistake.”

I turn toward her in my seat. She’s not shivering. She’s shaking. Small tremors.

“Aunt Shannon’s been pushy lately.” She opens up her bag of M&M and pours them into her ice cream bucket. She drops the bag onto the center console. “She doesn’t have any kids, you know. She got married late.”

She has to struggle to try to swirl the ice cream with the M&Ms. The bucket is sweating but the ice cream is still hard enough to put up a struggle. “But she wanted a daughter. She takes me places. Fundraisers and stuff. Right now, I’m supposed to be at a silent auction raising money for Children’s Hospital.” She stops trying to mix the ice cream for a moment and motions to her

dress. It's tight around her bust. It's etched with flowers I didn't notice earlier.

"When I was feeling down, I got mad. Really mad at Aunt Shannon." She tries to swirl the ice cream. "I thought, what's the worst thing I can do to her. What would make her really mad." She tugs until the plastic spoon snaps.

"I could ruin her reputation. Telling her I hated her wouldn't do anything. She doesn't care about me, she cares that we're related. So what's the worst thing I could do to her, the quickest way to ruin her reputation?"

I don't want to hate Avery. But I know I'm getting there. I know one sentence more and it's over. I try to speak but she cuts me off. She knows it's over too.

"Maes came over and it was easy to hurt Aunt Shannon and make myself feel better." She puts the lid back on the ice cream bucket and puts the bucket back into one of the grocery bags. She picks up the empty M&Ms bag and balls it up.

"I slept with Maes to make Aunt Shannon mad. That should be the worst thing. But the real worst thing is that after all that, I didn't even tell my aunt. Take me home, Link."

I can't drive fast enough to get her out of my car.

*

I don't bother putting the car in park when I arrive back at Avery's. I hold my foot to the brake and give her enough time to collect her things and get out. The two-toned Lexus is parked in front of me, Aunt Shannon's car. She's here for Avery, no doubt, and getting furious about it. Avery surveys the car, then smiles at me.

She gets out, but speaks through the open window. "Courage, that's what I need."

I don't give her a response. I move my foot to the gas and jet out of the Tiny Kingdom. I don't stop until I'm home. I don't stop then, either. I keep going. I make circles around my

neighborhood. One circle two circle three circle four circle. I don't know what to do. It's not for me to tell Maes about any of this. If the truth's going to be told then it has to come from Avery. It won't mean anything coming from me. I pull into my driveway. All the cars are here, which means I can expect a full house—Mom, Dad, Percy, and Byron.

I don't want to go in yet. I don't want to have to deal with Mom, who's telepathic, who will know something's wrong the moment she sees me. I can't have her judging me anymore than she already does. I catch my eyes in the rearview mirror. They're almost yellow from stress. I haven't slept well since Maes's absence, and I slept even worse last night. My eyes are a watery, snotty kind of yellow. I can't go into my house. I can't go anywhere.

I'm stuck.

*

Mitchell Harris lives out in tiny Irondale, AL, about twenty, twenty-five minutes from Vulcan High School. I pull up in front of his house—powder yellow, compact, with two big windows facing the front—and shut off my engine. Mitchell's pickup is in the driveway and a red Subaru is parked under a carport attached to the side of the house. Like much of Alabama, the street in the neighborhood you live on means almost as much as where you live. Mitchell's street is filled with small houses—one-story but with a lot of lawn.

I get out and walk to the front door. I take a breath to see if I'm really going to do this, to see if I'm really going to knock on Mitchell Harris's front door. The breath passes and my hand knocks before I have time to second breath myself.

Mitchell's mother, the woman from the Art Connection opens the front door on the second knock. She's barefoot, like I know my mom is back home, and she's got on a loose blue

dress. I've made a horrible mistake. I can feel it.

She stands a bit behind the door, only half open. The screen door's locked tight, and a family of gnats tries its hardest to push its way inside.

"Who are you?" She doesn't remember, but she doesn't show fear and that frightens me. Fear I can deal with; I can try to explain that away, I can prove that I'm harmless. But hatred—clear as the May's Sunday sky I'm standing under—that's something I can't fix. That's something I've got no weapon to fight against.

My face grows hot. Sweat gathers where I haven't grown a goatee. My palms and my feet have an itch. I need to leave.

She calls for Daniel but never takes her eyes off me. I don't feel anything but fear.

Mitchell's stepdad walks up holding a glass of water. "What?" He takes a sip and notices me. He smiles, hands Mitchell's mom a glass, and opens the screen door.

"Mitch's friend, right?"

Mitchell's mother stares at Mitchell's stepdad now. She holds the screen door closed.

I nod first then speak. "Yeah. Hi. Lincoln."

Mitchell's stepdad steps outside. The screen door shuts behind him. He holds out his hand and I shake it.

"Mitchell's mowing the lawn. Come on back." He nods over his shoulder and walks. I don't glance back at Mitchell's mother; I follow his stepdad.

I don't know if he doesn't understand it—if people see hatred in different colors than one another, if what seems obvious to me isn't clear to everybody else—or if he's trying to protect me by not taking me into that house which is probably more hers than his—but I'm grateful. I'm grateful that I don't have to go in there. I'm grateful for Mitchell's stepdad.

Mitchell Harris is wearing a faded D.A.R.E. shirt and a pair of loose, old blue jeans. He's pushing a mower across the backyard—huge, with a couple of trees standing around like lingering party guests—and sweating. He's red.

The motor's louder than my heart, which I hadn't realized was beating this loudly until I heard the motor. Mitchell's stepdad approaches Mitchell and waves him to a stop. Mitchell shuts off the lawnmower, tugs out his ear buds.

I don't know who's more surprised that I'm here.

His stepdad returns to me. "You want a Coke?"

"No, thanks."

"Mitch, I'm going to start on the front when you're done. Come find me." He stumps over to the back door of the house, yanks it open, and goes inside. He shuts the door.

Mitchell goes past me and picks up a sweat rag resting on the concrete patio. He wipes it across his face and neck, then hangs it around his neck. He's got mosquito bites big as dimes on his face and neck and I can tell by how slow moving he is that he's been out here for hours.

The lawn is damn near perfect.

"Cold day in hell." He sits down on the patio and picks up a water bottle. He drinks.

"Something like that." I go over to him but I don't sit. "Let's get this over with. We going to talk about Avery?" Avery is the last person I want to talk about but I know she's the most important to Mitchell. I know that Mitchell is the last chance, the absolute last chance.

He's taking in water as if he doesn't expect to see it again. He takes hard swallows.

"Or Maes?"

"We're not talking about Maes."

"Okay. We don't talk about Maes. Avery then."

“I got nothing much to say about her, either.”

I scratch at the side of my neck. A mosquito’s already got me. “Bullshit.” It hasn’t been five minutes and I already want to leave. But I’ve used my other options. Mitchell is the last one left. “How bad did you like her?”

He wipes his face with the sweat rag. A long, hard swipe at his face. He scoots back a little on the patio, pushes his body a bit out of the sun.

“What do you want?”

I don’t know what I expected from Mitchell Harris. I knew he wasn’t going to swing open the door and hug me. I knew we weren’t going to leave here, grab a burger, and start to like each other. He probably wouldn’t even have opened the door for me. The only reason we’re this close to talking is because I’m desperate and his stepdad seems to think we’re friends. But we’ve never been friends, not in the near year we’ve known each other, and definitely not now, with everything gone to absolute shit.

I see his mother in the window. She’s peering at us, her eyes a much sharper hazel than her son’s. She sees me noticing her. She grinds her teeth, mouth closed. She pulls back the curtains and Mitchell checks to see what I’m staring at but it’s too late, she’s already gone.

“Brown?”

The backdoor opens and his mother stands under the molding. Mitchell watches over his shoulder. He stares at me.

“You gone finish this yard?” she asks Mitchell. “How long you plan to stay out here, anyway? It’s getting late.”

What if the audience doesn’t like me? What if they hate me before I’ve even taken the stage? What if they’ve got eyes like Mitchell’s mother’s, sharp as glass, ready to cut me down at

any moment, ready to cut me down right now. Maybe I'm too sensitive about black and white. Maybe my worst fears are over-exaggerations, no closer to coming true than a kid's fear of the boogeyman. But then how do I account for this? How do I account for this kind of hatred?

"I'll finish it when we're done talking." Mitchell stands. "We're going to my room."

I don't know who's more surprised: Mitchell, me, or his mother. Mitchell props a foot up against the concrete slab of the patio and uses it to wedge off his shoe. He does the same with the other foot.

"Come on, Lincoln."

I don't want to go into this house. But Mitchell Harris, in his own way, is asking me to trust him. And yeah, he's probably just foddering me for whatever feud he's having with his mother. And yes we still hate each other, and yes, I'm terrified of this house and this moment, but if I don't follow Mitchell Harris right now I'll never be able to get up on stage, I'll never get to AX with everyone, and I'll never be able to live down that I let Mitchell Harris be a bigger person than me.

I follow him. He goes right on past his mother and me through a small kitchen and down a short hall. He enters into the first bedroom on the left. He shuts the door behind us.

He flips over a notebook on his bed and sits down on the comforter. His room marks a shrine to industry. There sit framed pictures of him and others pouring iron. There hang G Gundam, Gundam Wing, and Gundam Seed posters, and Macross* and Gigantor* and Eureka Seven* posters and cast-iron models. There are Akira and Macross wallscrolls and wall clocks. I spy VHS tapes—no, are those Beta?—and DVDs. Iron robots line the perimeter of the room and there's a clear evolution: bulkier older robots, coming apart now, rusting, leading into newer robots—sturdier, bigger, more complex.

“Where do you hide your hentai?”

He’s on the very edge of the bed. “We’re talking about porn now?”

“Hentai is art. Porn is porn.”

“How long did you know?”

I study a G Gundam poster. Domon Kasshu has one his raised, his Queen of Hearts tattoo visible. There are a thousand questions that could be and a thousand answers. “About?”

“That they’d been knocking fucking boots.”

Because there’s no need to, I don’t lie. “Not much longer than you. And it was once.”

“Like that fucking matters.”

“I think it does.”

“Well you didn’t like one of them.” He didn’t mean to say that. There’s no way he’d admit something like that to me.

“Avery’s not gay, she’s just lonely.”

“You know her well, huh?”

“Same as everybody else knows her, including you.” I squat to pick up an older robot. He’s square and boxy and standing completely straight. There’s no life in him. “You sure it’s all right to have me here?”

“I invited you in, didn’t I?”

“I’m still confused about that part.”

“I’ll bet you are.” He drags his hand over the top of his forehead. He’s frustrated with me.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning you’ve had a problem with me since the first day we fucking met.”

I step away from the robot and turn to fully face Mitchell. “I had a problem with you? Me

with you?” I point from him to me. “You’re the one with the problem. The first day I met you, you all but called me the n-word.”

“When the fuck did I ever come close to that?” His ears turn red. It’s the tips now, but I know he turns full-on Rudolph when he gets mad.

“When you told me I was in your light.”

“That’s because you were in my fucking light.”

“Guess I’ve been in your light this whole time?”

He gets up and walks over to me. I take a step back.

“If we don’t solve shit-else today, let me tell you this. I’m not the fucking racist in the room. I’m not the one always making this shit a black-and-white thing.”

He’s way too close to me.

“You’re the one with the goddamned race problem. You ever think that maybe I don’t like you because I don’t like you?” He avoids my question.

I don’t say anything, and it hits me. Earlier, he called me Lincoln. Not Brown, but Lincoln.

“Do I have—did I have a problem with Maes? Before she went around fucking Avery? You ever hear me call her anything? Talk bad about her?”

My stomach feels like I’ve eaten too much candy way too quickly. My cheeks burn as red as Mitchell’s ears.

Mitchell’s never called me anything—yeah, we’ve both come close to cussing the other out, and yeah, he’s been known to say things that aren’t always PC—the Cairo jab, calling people and things pansies—but does that make him as bad as I’ve been thinking? I go away from him, look out his window. Does that make it worth all the thoughts I’ve had about him? I touch

the sill. I can see myself in the window and Mitchell standing near the door, red and angry. I observe my hands. They're so dark, so much darker than Mitchell's and Maes's and Avery's. So much darker than my brother's golden hands. Mitchell can't understand what that's like. To be young and dark in Alabama. To be afraid that the world expects the worst of you.

I step away from the window. Maybe Mitchell Harris just doesn't like me and if that's the case, that's fine. I can live with that.

I scratch my head. I want answers. I want certainty. I stare up at Mitchell and I feel so many things—anger, jealousy, confusion. But there's also something else. I stare up at Mitchell and notice he's watching me, waiting. He hasn't called me anything. He isn't my enemy. For the first time in my life, I think that maybe I'm as much a part of my problem as Mitchell is.

But I don't want to lose, not to him. "And your mom?" She isn't a figment; her anger is real.

"My mother has nothing to do with me." He goes back to his bed and sits. He picks up the notebook he turned over when we came in. "I'm not here because I want to be. My dad got me here. Told me it was time to 'fix things.' A lot of luck that's been having. Maybe she'll be better with this new kid." He sits the notebook back down.

"What happens between you and me has got shit to do with you being black and me being white. You got that?" He holds onto the ends of the sweat rag, each end wrapped around his neck.

I'm glad he can't see how red I am. "Yeah. We're clear on that."

"Good." He rises. "I need to finish the yard."

"What about Avery and Maes?"

He seems like my dad, tired from his shift, or my mom, tired from hers. "I'm done with

Avery and Maes.” He opens the door. “And I’m done with you.”

He leaves, and I follow. He leads me to the front door, pulls it open and unlocks the screen door.

I never thought I’d feel this bad, seeing Mitchell. I never thought we had anything that could be lost. He shuts the door the moment I step outside. There’s no loud bang, no dramatic swing. A click.

One click, and it’s all over.

CHAPTER TEN

I sit at the Sonics in Center Point, holding onto a melted banana split. I don't know what else I'm supposed to do. I've spoken to Maes. I've spoken to Avery. I've even spoken to Mitchell. There's no one left to convince that what we have is worth saving.

And maybe that's the problem. Maybe this isn't worth saving. We weren't supposed to be together in the first place. Avery shines. She's rich, she's beautiful, she should have no problem making one-thousand-and-two friends. Maes worships the nineties, is in love with the eighties, and is courting the seventies. She's so far left she's practically made a circle and bumped into the right, right up against Mitchell, conservative, big, practical. And then there's me. I was floating before I got to Vulcan. My middle school friends, the ones who sat with me at the lunch table every day, the ones who I used to talk about *Dragon Ball Z* and *B-san* with changed when we got into high school. They stopped watching anime and started playing sports, found girlfriends and jobs and bad cases of not giving a shit about me. I was floating before Vulcan. I was floating.

I had panic attacks. I'd hike the hallways and I'd be two steps away from class and suddenly I felt like I couldn't go any further. My legs would tighten, like somebody had clamped them down to the floor. Everybody else was moving.

When I got like that, I'd think of a song. Any song I could think of. Sometimes it was Hendrix, sometimes Steve Conte, sometimes a jingle from a commercial. I needed to focus on a rhythm. If I could see movement—if I could count beats—I'd be all right. I could keep going. I would keep going. My legs would unfreeze.

But I can't think of a song right now and every station on the radio is playing a commercial and a jingle's not good enough. My hands shake and I know that any CD I try to

insert will fall to the floor.

We're not going to AX. We can't go, not when everyone's like this and it's May. It's fucking May and AX is in one month and summer is the worst time to hate each other because summer is the one time when time is our time. We don't have to see each other every day; we choose to. But if we don't, things will fall further apart, like the ice caps melting in Antarctica, a slow drift caused by gradual heat: Maes's lesbianism, Mitchell's love, Avery's cruelty.

Belonging can't be the very best thing there is, because if it is and I'm all alone, what does that make me?

The banana split melts and I'm angry. I'm not even in this loop. I'm not the one who fucked this up, I'm not the one who decided that sleeping with Avery was a good idea or that sitting on my hands and praying that Avery noticed me was a better one.

I'm the one trying to fix it. I'm trying my absolute best to fix it and it isn't working. In Japan, they say ganbatte, do your best. Do your best. Go once said that ganbatte was the worst word ever invented. It's a punishment. It means we have to always keep moving and doing and going without taking the time to think and to question. He says that's the problem with Japan. They don't question. They never have. And maybe I never really have either.

I drive home with the ice cream container on my lap.

*

I study for the rest of the night and I don't stop till French becomes a second language. And even then it's not a stop, it's a break. Byron's left snacks outside of my door—one of his Capri Suns and a Lunchable. I tear into processed ham-something. I squeeze out Capri Sun until the package is just a warped, silver sliver. I rub my eyes and do hand stretches. I pull my fingers back, work out my palms, and massage my knuckles. I clutch Castro. I plug in my headphones,

and play “God Knows.” God Knows I’ve been trying to keep my head on straight. God knows I don’t know what to do—I’m *tired* of not knowing what to do—God knows I want this all to be over.

It’s the final episode. Last week of school. Either we make up or I can kiss AX goodbye. I fuck up a note. I pluck a string, any string.

*

I drive Byron to school early on Monday so that I can review my notecards before my pre-calculus exam. He asks me, on the way, what’s wrong. He says I act sad. He says,

“Your music is sad.”

I take my eyes off the road.

“Stop sign!” he shouts.

I brake. We stop just in time, but the people in the car across the way look spooked. Byron’s holding onto his seatbelt, his skinny arms locked to his chest.

“I’m sorry.” Has my music gotten sad? I try to remember what I’ve been playing. “God Knows” by Aya Hirano is about as upbeat as it gets. There’s no denying that sharp sound of the electric solo in the middle. Have I muted that sound? Has everything saddened?

Byron opens his eyes one at a time. Then, he does the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me. He peers at me and says, “You’ll be okay.”

*

I take eight classes in a year, and exams are broken into four days—first period A day, second period A day on Monday; third period A day, fourth period A-day on Tuesday; first period B day, second period B day on Wednesday; and third period B day, fourth period B day on Thursday. Friday’s a make-up day for everybody with excused absences and a chill day for

everybody without. They don't have a chill day during the first half of the year, which means that this is my first one. But I hear a moonwalk and popcorn's involved and attendance still counts, so Mom'll make me show up whether I want to or not.

Maes's hair is gone. That's not what I mean. What I mean is her incredibly long, incredibly thick hair is gone. Her hair's almost as short as Mitchell's now, just touching her ears. And it's dyed. Jet black.

Roy Mustang.

Even the guys are noticing her. Abner, who usually spends the first five minutes of class drinking from his coffee cup, stares.

Maes sits down in front of me, like she always does. She's wearing a collared shirt, but her neck's so long I can still see it. It's my first time seeing it from behind.

"I like the bangs," the girl who sits beside Maes says. "I think the style frames your face."

"Thank you."

I hear someone behind me whisper "test stress," but I don't turn around to see who it is. Abner stands at the front of the classroom, holding up the exam.

"Put your books away and turn off your phones. If your phone rings, automatic F, no exception." He hits the edge of his desk with the tests.

I can't stop staring at Maes. The girl beside me shoves a pencil into my arm. She mouths out, "What happened?" I note Abner. He travels down my row. I lean back in my seat. It's too late to ask questions now.

For one year, Mr. Abner has managed to slip in a lesson about functions every single week. For one entire year. But the moment I'm handed the exam, I flip through it. Not one single question on functions. I feel my leg seizing up. It's not a panic attack, but it's something close.

Frustration. And I'm not the only one. The people around me are feeling it, too. We could kill this man. We could strangle him. But we don't. Instead, we take our exams. We write furiously. We work the anger out through our fingers. My calluses throb. They're used to strings, not pencils. The skin is cracking.

There's a line to get out of the door when the exam is over. Maes, who finished ahead of me, is at the front, and the people directly in front of me are whispering. They're pointing. They're glancing.

We finally squeeze out, but Maes is already way ahead of me and I don't know what I'd say to her even if I caught her. I head up the stairs and to American History, but I don't enter the classroom. Not yet. I sit outside by the lockers and flip through my notebook. JFK, MLK, Bull Connor, Neil Armstrong, Wilhelm Harster, George Bush, Barack Obama, Sonia Sotomayor, Anders Behring Breivik. Miss Dubois appears, holding a water bottle. She stops right in front of me. I glance into her classroom. Another teacher, Mr. Clampton, is holding down the fort, guarding her exam papers.

"Are you prepared?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. You've reviewed the notes."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Excellent." She steps back as if she's about to turn and go into the classroom. But she stops. She clears her throat at me. "And Avery?"

"She's good."

"Excellent."

She knows I'm lying and she knows that I know she knows. But she doesn't ask anything

else. She steps into her classroom, and defeated, I follow. I take my seat. Avery is late. I scoot my desk further away from her empty one.

Avery shows. She doesn't bounce down the aisles or run over to me. She walks in, like a normal person, the anime persona gone; she's no longer the Genki Girl. She's Avery McAllister, only child of Chase and Mary Elisabeth McAllister, and her chin is tilted up so far it's a wonder she can see where she's going. The truth of a person isn't in their eyes but in their hands. Avery's are clenched, her arms locked tight against her side. It's the way superheroes stand before they take off toward some unreachable height.

Miss Dubois shuts the door two minutes later. She passes out the test. She doesn't have to tell us to shut off our phones; we know what will happen if we even breathe incorrectly. The door handle jiggles. Miss Dubois shakes her head. She turns and mouths out a single word: no.

*

We can leave after we finish our two exams. The cafeteria is technically open, but I don't feel like eating here. With so many people moving around, there's no telling if Avery and Maes are eating, and I don't want to run into either of them. I don't want to run into Mitchell, either.

I'm halfway through the double doors when I hear Maes. Even though I'm facing away from her, I know it's her. No one else has a voice like hers, not at this school. A sound, when hitting the right notes, goes straight to me stomach. Maes is laughing. I turn around. She's talking to Mary Elizabeth. Shanti's nowhere in sight. She's talking to Mary Elizabeth and laughing.

For some reason, this is the thing that pushes me over the edge. My feet feel like stones but I drag them through the double doors. The hallway gets smaller and smaller, like a throat closing in. I feel my chest heaving, trying to find air. I push through the front doors and stand outside in the light. I can feel every push of air on my skin. Even single bit of air. I have to hold

onto the railing to make it down the stairs and I know I appear strange. I know people are watching me, and that makes it harder to remember how to walk. When I finally reach the bottom, I have to practically drag my feet to my car. I swing open the door and climb inside. I try to push the car into reverse but the car won't let me; I've forgotten to plug in the key. I pull it out of my pocket, drop it on the console, pick it up, and put it in the ignition. I put the car in reverse and back out without checking. I don't hit anything. I drive.

How can she be laughing when everything's gone to the lowest level of Hell? What's funny about this? Mitchell Harris has disowned us all. Avery has stopped being Avery—or maybe Avery has begun being Avery, I'm not sure, I only know that whoever she is she isn't who she was—and you, Maes, you practically told me to give up. And you can laugh. You can laugh with Mary Elizabeth. You can chop off your hair and start over, like the past ten months haven't even happened. Are you human? Did this mean something to you?

I'm in front of The Guitar Shop in unheard of time. I park in the gravel lot, scramble out and shut my door—only it doesn't catch, so I have to close it again. I slouch into the shop and Myrtle, like always, hunkers behind the desk. She sits down her magazine.

She glances at a clock hanging behind the counter. "It's barely noon. What are you doing here? Wait, you don't even work today."

I can walk normally again. The room isn't growing smaller. Myrtle is as big as she always is. I step to the counter. "Sell it to me."

She scratches the side of her head, not like she's confused, like she's got an itch. She scratches furiously. "What?"

"Fender Mustang." I point to Alisa, hanging on the wall, shining in the yellow fluorescent light. She's been beamed from Heaven.

Myrtle glances over her shoulder at Alisa. “You’re going to buy it?”

I pull out my wallet and yank out my debit card. I put it on the counter.

“It’s eight hundred. Employee discount.”

I slide the card to her. “I want it.”

Myrtle slides off her stool. She goes over to Alisa and pulls her from her floating stand.

Myrtle carries her to the back, but returns a moment later—a moment that feels like an hour. She holds a blood red case. It’s old and probably cheap. She sets it on the counter and opens her up. And there’s my Alisa, shining bright, brighter because of the red.

Myrtle grabs my card and swipes it on the register. She watches the screen and waits. The machine is old as music, and it takes forever for it to read the code. When it does, she returns my card and prints a receipt. It’s the quickest sell we’ve ever made—no inspection, no demo. I sign the receipt and slide it back to Myrtle. I pick up Alisa and hold her like she’s Shanti.

I don’t say goodbye. And what I’ve done doesn’t hit me until I’m standing in the empty parking lot and holding Alisa.

I just spent most of the money I have in the world.

*

Alisa lies on my bed. I sit in my desk chair facing her. I’ve fucked up. Everything I’ve done for the past few months—working overtime, practicing my guitar, bidding on costumes, convincing Percy to give up a week of summer—has been lost. I spent almost every Lincoln I had on this guitar. There’s nothing left, nothing.

But that’s not what’s killing me. I know Myrtle. She’s a great guitarist but a terrible businesswoman. Her heart’s too big. She’ll let me return the guitar. She’ll lose out on an eight hundred dollar sell just to help me. It’s not that I can’t return Alisa. It’s not even that I won’t

return Alisa. It's that when I had the chance to decide between going to AX and buying this guitar, I chose the guitar. I chose music over anime, the thing that's kept me sane and grounded and alive. I chose music over Maes, Avery, and Mitchell. I can return Alisa, but I can never erase the choice.

Any song I play on this instrument is going to sound tinged with avarice. Each string plucked will be a reminder of selfishness and something else: hurt. Knowing that Maes can laugh without me. Knowing what a beautiful sound her laughter is at all.

I sleep with Alisa's case beside me. The case glows in the moonlight that comes in through my windows, curtainless since I can remember, and the glow reminds me of Maes. How luminous was her white skin in the moonlight. How she seemed like a ghost, like Ana from *The Haunting*—here, but also in the in-between. Waiting to be let go of.

*

Percy's at home when I wake up. I hear him pissing in mine and Byron's bathroom, taking his time like I don't have exams in a matter of moments. I knock on the door and he swings it open with his free hand, the other hand holding onto a towel.

"I in your way?"

Yes, I want to say, *always fucking yes*. "I have exams."

"Glad I finished those two weeks ago." He throws up a hand in goodbye and I don't watch him go. I watch his hand.

No calluses. I hold onto the doorframe. Ugly hands. Idle hands. I rest my head against the doorframe. I'm not crying but tears are there. And maybe it's because I'm exhausted—from studying, from worrying, from anticipation—but I feel vindicated. I feel, for a brief second, in the time it takes Goku to transport from point A to point B, that I could love my brother. I could

love him because as brilliant as he is—smooth talker, charmer, good son—he’s not a creator. His life is neat. But mine isn’t. I’m about to go crazy worrying about AX and worrying about Maes and Avery and Mitchell. I’ve got the hours to show for this life—the fingers hard as the British Literature final I haven’t taken but know to fear—the hours of sleep loss, the yellowed eyes of a late night session, Bose headphones keeping my sounds a secret. Percy may be perfect and perfect might be better but I’m all right with bruises that mean something.

I do cry. Not a lot. A tear in each eye. No one’s around to see it. I go into the bathroom and shut the door and I feel, for the first time in a week, that I might be okay one day.

*

Dylan Tomas tells me not to go gentle into that good night even as Bob Dylan tells me that if I’m not being born, I’m dying. I’m not sure who to follow, and either could be right and they both could be wrong. But I’m seventeen and sitting in British Literature and trying to figure out how to answer the first Dylan. I don’t have old age and I’m already burning. Maybe I’m not raging into the night, against the dying of the light, but I’m trying. I’m trying as hard as I can to make the things in my world—small as it is—work.

I’m the last in my class to turn in my paper. Mr. Whittaker bids me farewell.

I go on to Psychology. I pass Maes in the hallway—four hundred students and I can always find her, find them—and she doesn’t say anything to me and I don’t say anything to her. Two girls follow behind her. They glance at me, then at Maes. They don’t say anything. I turn and go down the other hallway. The psychology exam takes the full two hours—like the British Literature exam did—and there’s the same feeling I always have after a long test. The feeling that it shouldn’t have taken nearly as long as it did.

I go home. I don't eat lunch at school. I make myself a sandwich then go into the dining room to study. My room is no longer a safe place. If I go there, I'll see Alisa. I'll have to pretend that I'm okay with giving her up. Or worse, I'll have to pretend that I'm okay with keeping her. I study chemistry and government, but honestly, my head's too full of things for me to really focus. I stand and stretch halfway through. The house is empty. Byron's at school and my parents are at work and I'll never have this much of the house to myself again. I sit back at the dining room table and study some more.

*

Mitchell has Spanish II down the hall from me. I catch him heading to class, and I don't say a word. Neither does he. Noah and I team up again for our last lab, a surprise to us because we didn't expect this final to involve actual experimentation. But I feel better knowing I can leave here having proof of my results—either I failed the experiment or I didn't.

Noah and I pass. Whether we got an A or a B or C is up in the air, but nothing exploded and all the notations we made seem logical. We separate in the hallway and I go to government. Shanti is already sitting down.

My leg freezes up again, but I've already made it to my seat. The more stressed I become, the harder it is for me to focus.

Mary Elizabeth slides into the seat behind Shanti. The desks are arranged in rows today, and not our usual circle. Today, one of Ms. Moretti's eyes opens larger than the other. The smell of freshly printed paper—our exams—is almost strong enough to crowd out the smell of anxiety-sweat and perfume.

“How's everyone feeling?”

There are shrugs.

“Nervous?”

Again, shrugs, but this time affirmative. Ms. Moretti smiles. “Don’t worry. It’s going to be painless. Hint: review your senators and city leaders.”

And with five minutes till testing, every person in the room pulls out their notebook and attempts to memorize the name of every Alabama senator, judge, congressman, and committee member. In my hazy, anxiety induced vision, I can see clouds of smoke popping from people’s heads.

Mary Elizabeth grabs onto Shanti’s shoulders and rubs. “We’re going to nail this.”

Shanti smiles back at Mary Elizabeth. And even though she’s not smiling at me, it still gives me energy. It just doesn’t give me time. Ms. Moretti shuts the door.

“Let’s get started.”

I’m surprised at how much I remember. I like history classes, because they stay the same, like math, but government has always been the opposite. Ms. Moretti teaches us about local leaders, and local leaders aren’t set in stone yet. They’re present tense. And for some reason, this always made them harder to remember. But the way Ms. Moretti does it, so that everything is relevant—from the cafeteria food to the school system itself to our senators—makes things easier to comprehend.

Mary Elizabeth stretches in front of me, and when she does, the freckles on her arm move. She’s tan from volleyball, but I can still see the orange dots rounding her shoulders and arms. She stretches in her seat and nearly touches Shanti in the back. I wonder, for a moment, what she was talking about with Maes. What made Maes laugh. Was it something about Shanti? Was it something about me?

“Okay.” Ms. Moretti claps her hands. “We’ve got twenty minutes left. Finish up your last

thoughts to give yourselves time to check your work.”

I don't have time for this. I refocus on my test. I answer a question about the 222 schools that are potentially failing in Alabama if a particular bill passes. I answer another about which schools are excelling—Vulcan High, Jefferson County International Baccalaureate, and Mountain Brook High school, the school Avery is zoned to. I wonder if Avery ever regrets not going there. I shake my head, I need to focus. Twenty minutes turns into ten and ten turns into fewer, and before I know it the time is up and Shanti is standing bold and beautiful up ahead of me, her blue dress halfway up her thighs. I shut my eyes. I can't focus on anything.

Ms. Moretti takes my paper. “Are you feeling okay?” She juggles the papers in her hands.

“I'm fine.” I stand. I can feel my leg shaking, but I know if I press down hard enough I can stop it. I press down. It stops, but Ms. Moretti still has on her concerned face. I give her my best, harmless smile.

“I think I did okay on the test.”

“Do you need to see the nurse?”

Shanti's already out the door and I'm glad she doesn't have to hear this. “No, thanks. I enjoyed your class.”

“I enjoyed having you,” she says. She still sounds concerned, but by now she's figured out I'm not going to give her the right answer. “I wish you'd spoken up more.”

“I'm sorry.” I pick up my backpack and put one strap over my shoulder. “Really.”

“You should see the nurse if you're feeling sick.”

“Okay.” I go for the door. “Thank you.”

“Have a nice summer.”

“Thank you. Bye.”

I leave without waiting for a response. My day is over, and all that's left is to go home and study. I still don't know what to do about Alisa any more than I know what to do about Maes and Mitchell and Avery. I don't want to wait too long to return her, because I don't want Myrtle to think I've been playing her, trying to pull one over Myrtle's head.

A hand grabs me by the shoulder. I turn around. It's Noah.

"Hey," I say. We rarely bump into each other outside of class, and when we do, we usually give a head nod.

"You're friends with Clover?"

Another lie. She's not Clover Arden. She's not Maes. She's Korean born. She's some other person I can't imagine. In another universe, we're countries apart. "Yeah."

"I came from Lit with her," he says. He lets go of my shoulder. "I usually stay out of this kind of stuff, but some girls were bugging her. I thought you should know, guitar guru loyalty and all."

I'm already walking toward Lit. Noah's behind me. I know I should ask *bugging how?* I know it's really not my business, not when Maes has been ignoring me all week, for shame or for some other reason. But I can't stop walking. I can't. I round a corner. Maes is halfway down the hall. I move a little faster.

"Is that a problem?" Maes is different when her head tilts to the side. There's no long hair sliding down her shoulders. Her bangs move, her hair moves, but it's different. She could star in a Korean boy band. Be the guy girls give their hearts to.

The girls who are talking to her poke out their lips to one side and eye each other. One girl finally glares at Maes and says, "Nope." The girls move away as Noah and I approach. They don't leave, but they do stand further away.

People pass us by.

Maes turns to us. She's holding her Lit book in one hand. Her messenger bag hangs from one shoulder. She's wearing navy blue shorts and a light blue vest. Her Keds are pumped up to capacity. She doesn't seem herself even though it's her stance: body leaned slightly to one side, hip out.

"What was that about?" Noah asks. He's grinning. "Huh?"

"Nothing. Bye." She turns and walks. She doesn't address me at all.

I turn around. The girls side-eye Noah and me, shrug, and leave.

"Bugging her how, exactly?"

Noah shrugs. "You know how girls do." He starts for the stairs and I follow. "Swarm in."

Down the stairs we go. The stairway, crowded with people, smells like mold, perfume, and sweat. I feel my leg giving out, but I make it to the bottom with Noah. We're through the doors.

"Well, see you."

"Yeah. Thanks."

We separate. I don't try to find Maes. I head home knowing I've only got two more days until summer.

Only French II and Music are left for me on Thursday. I practiced French all last night, staying up late to make sure I could conjugate correctly. Madame Beaumont gives her exams in sections: reading and comprehension, writing, and listening. I can hear French better than I could read it, and Mom says that's because I spend so much time practicing guitar. I'm an auditory learner, she says, which means that while I can't always spell everything right in French—I

misspell five out of ten words, missing accent marks and forgetting O's—I can hear it fine. So when I practice at night, I listen to a French song, “Sympathique” by Pink Marini.

Byron bugs me to take him to McDonalds in the morning, and even though I have exams, I do it. I pop a French CD into the CD player, and Byron tries to sing the words. I'm tired, my hands are literally shaking from everything—from everything—but when my little brother sings, I laugh. He's as bad as me trying to sing in Japanese.

I drop him off at school and head to Vulcan. I must seem like deep fried shit. I woke up with yellow eyes again and I had to order a water, not a Coke or a coffee, to try and stop some of the shaking. I know I must appear like deep fried shit, because people keep staring at me. But I also know it's the last day of exams, and my jitteriness will be blamed on Red Bull, Five Hour Energy, or some kind of combination.

I climb the stairs to French and take my seat behind Maes. Even though we're no longer speaking to each other, neither one of us has bothered to change seats. I read somewhere that sticking to one seat increases productivity. And I'm stubborn as fuck.

People are whispering in French and English, but I don't hear what they're saying because I'm listening to another French song through my earphones. When Madame Beaumont enters, all muttering stops, and I put away my earphones and my notebooks.

Madame Beaumont passes out the test, and we begin with the written section, reading and writing comprehension. In an hour, she'll begin the oral section. I wish this was reversed, but there's nothing I can do about it. I try to really focus on what I'm reading, but it's hard to do that when I can't stop thinking about the visibility of Maes's neck, and Alisa sitting at home on my bed. I wonder how schools in Japan do this. I wonder if their exams are like ours. I've seen a ton of anime, but test taking is always skipped over. Characters study before the test and celebrate or

weep when it's over, depending on how they think they did. Grades are posted in the hallway for everyone to see. You couldn't get away with that here. Parents would riot. Students would cry.

The oral part of the test begins. I wonder if Madame Beaumont sings at home. She has three sons like my parents, and I wonder if she ever sings to them. I wonder if they can already speak French. I know the answers to this part of the test. My hand moves more confidently, but I've still got the shakes. Maes is writing away, and I imagine her hair falling over the back of her chair when she leans a little to the right. She's ambidextrous. Today, she writes with the left.

The exam is over. We turn in our papers and go, and I don't waste any time getting downstairs to Music. The theory part is tougher than the playing part, and I'd prefer to read guitar tabs than piano sheets, but I play my best anyway. This test, at least, I know I've passed. I pat Speakeasy on the keys and leave the music room. I see Avery on my way out the entry, and I slow down because I don't have to go through the door with her. She's stares straight ahead. Her hair's worn down again, no special style. No rain boots, either.

I don't speak to her. I go home knowing that the guitar was once a one-man instrument, no dreams of headlining a band, no dreams of leading an orchestra. It was a quiet instrument, soft-spoken, solitary. It couldn't compete with all those other sounds—wind instruments, strong voices. It could only create a background noise, so tiny that it was barely heard, like your conscience when the wrong choice is the right choice for you.

Right now, I'm not booming. I'm not playing metal, heavy or otherwise, rock, hard or progressive. I'm an old school guitar. I'm a man and his instrument. I'm squeaking so quietly, nobody's hearing me. Not Maes, not Avery, not Mitchell.

I lock Alisa in her case. I know that even if I return her, it won't bring Maes, Avery, and Mitchell around. I know that our dreams of going to AX are all but over. I don't care right now. I

want to do what feels right. I want something to feel right.

*

“Faggot.”

It’s the girl who, many months ago, said she couldn’t see why Jefferson County’s problems had anything to do with us. The girl from the art festival.

Maes gawks down at her. She’s got a foot over her.

It’s like somebody pressed pause on the hallway. Everybody’s stopped moving forward. It’s the last day of classes, the carnival day. The hallways aren’t as crowded as they could be; most people are outside standing in line for the moonwalk or buying popcorn or struggling up the rock climb.

For the first time in a week, Maes, Mitchell, Avery, and I are in the same hallway. Avery has stopped at the art room door. Mitchell stands at least ten feet from Maes, right in front of his locker. It’s not luck that we’re all here today. I sent out an email asking everyone to meet. My hands shook the whole time. My legs feel like cement now. I wanted to make a clean cut. If you don’t make a clean cut, you’ll bleed out.

“What?” Maes asks. “What?”

The girl glares at Maes. Her lip is in a snarl. Someone presses play. People are moving again. Some of them are heading to the door, others are moving in on Maes. Their cellphones are already out. They’re turning on video. They’re waiting for a show.

A guy walks over to the girl. He scrutinizes Maes from crown to Keds. Everyone stares in Maes’s direction.

This whole time I’d been waiting for the n-word. I’d been waiting on nigger like I’d been expecting him. But that’s not what I got. That’s not what this girl, tiny with a droll, yells out

across the hallway. It's not me and maybe it hasn't been me this whole time. I've walked down these hallways for ten months and nobody's ever said anything to me. People have looked, sure, but people are always watching somebody. Maybe all those stares I thought I was getting—those glares—maybe they weren't meant for me. I think back on it. Half those moments came when I was with Maes.

How long have they known?

The girl and the guy have Maes in a corner. I can tell by the way they guys standing, right beside Blount County, that he's her boyfriend. That he's going to back her up on this. But he doesn't have the chance. Because Mitchell Harris—two hundred plus pounds, six feet tall, clumbers over to the girl and the guy and says no, and I'm at Maes's side quicker than I realize is possible. Avery bolts from the art room.

The girls stare at us. "You're defending her?"

"Looks like it." Mitchell says.

"She's burning in hell." There's this famous picture of Elizabeth Eckford, one of the students from the Little Rock Nine. Eckford's dressed in white. She's got on her glasses and she's holding her books and her mind seems kind of far off, like she gives exactly two fucks about the people damning her name. Behind her is a white student, dressed like she's fresh out of a Johnny Rockets picture. She's jeering. Her nose is turned up, her mouth is a warbled "O." That's the face the girl from government is making.

Avery runs up and screams in Blount County's face. Screams. Her hands fly behind her back and her shoulders go all the way forward and she could be getting ready to ski down a mountain from the way she's standing. She screams and everyone stares. Cell phones are up in the air.

Nothing ever changes. This city that Maes chooses to love—that she chooses to defend—never really changes. People will always find a way to hurt you. The methods change. We traded in fire hoses for cell phones, batons for internet postings. The targets changed. I'm just a dark spot, but Maes is a glowing, white bulls-eye. I'm the kind of sick I am when Miss Dubois covers slavery, when people look at me in government class, when Percy is perfect and I'm not. My legs are leaden things and I want to slink away and give up. But I can't. I care about Maes in a way that's warm and unfamiliar.

I've either made the worst decision of my life or the best. It's too soon to know. There are at least thirty people in the hallway, and at least fifteen of them have cell phones. This will go on YouTube. It'll get some hits. The internet lives forever.

I grab cell phones and Mitchell does the same. Somebody pushes me—a guy whose iPhone I've taken—but I push back. My legs don't feel as cumbersome. Mitchell is a boulder. He bumps into people and takes their cell phones. People backtrack and even though there are fifteen targets and three of us—Maes isn't moving, isn't saying anything—we take fifteen cell phones. A guy elbows Mitchell in the face and Mitchell hits him right back.

And this goes on for three minutes. Hitting, shoving, taking. Avery holds the cell phones close to her chest. She squats down into a ball and blocks anyone from getting their phone back.

It only takes another ten seconds for the principal to show up and it only takes another half-second for people to talk over each other—for everyone but Maes, Mitchell, Avery, and me to call names. They call our names like canaries. Our principal doesn't ask what happened. He points in the direction of the school offices, and we follow. Avery refuses to let go of the cell phones even as people reach out for her. We form a half-moon around Maes. Fifteen other students trail behind us. I know this without having to turn.

The principal confiscates all of the cell phones, and we're relieved for this. He says everyone will get their phone back once he's figured out what's happened. He calls the girl and the boy into his office while Maes, Avery, Mitchell, and I wait in the chairs outside of his door. The fifteen other students are gathered in the hallway. I can see them glaring through the glass.

"You guys are idiots," Maes says. She closes her eyes. "You know I don't care."

"Bullshit," Mitchell says. He's breathing heavy. "You were five minutes away from being a Yahoo story."

"You know they're going to suspend you." She says this to Mitchell. He's sweating from running. He's breathing heavy.

"Fuck it. It's the last day of school."

The secretary peers over her desk at Mitchell. Mitchell doesn't give her the time of day.

"I really don't care." Maes runs her fingers through her hair, but her hand goes back too far. She's reaching for hair that isn't there anymore. "I wanted to look like Maes. And Roy."

"You are Maes." Avery says, and she's the one that's crying. She's the one who pulls her feet into her seat and cries.

Maes reaches over to touch her, like she always does. She wants to console her. She'll always want to. But her hand hovers. Mitchell and I watch it.

And since I wasn't the first one to run to her defense, I decide to be the first one to do this. I take her hand and put it on Avery's back. Maes sees me and I see her and shrug. And this is the thing that makes her cry: a shrug.

Avery turns in her seat and hugs Maes, and Mitchell gets up and walks over to the glass window. He tugs down the shades and returns to his seat. The secretary doesn't make any protest.

"Why didn't you ever say anything?" I ask Maes. I know she's not ashamed. I know she's

the kind of person who speaks her mind, who knows what it is she wants and knows how to devise a plan to obtain it. Then how did we arrive here? Why didn't she tell Avery, tell all of us?

"I didn't want to worry my parents."

"Your parents are cool. They'll understand." And I mean this; I really, really mean this.

"That's not what I'm talking about." Her arms are around Avery's shoulders. "I didn't want them to worry about me. I didn't want them to lose any business over me. I didn't want people to talk."

She hasn't been hiding it but she hasn't been denying it, either. She's been trying, this whole time, to strike a balance: to live her life as Maes but to make things easy for her parents.

Mitchell slumps down in his chair. "What a dumbass."

"I'm not the dumbass who's going to be suspended for fighting."

"That would be Mitchell. And me." I raise my hands and when I do it really hits me. Like really, really hits, me like a foul ball off a bat. We're not going to AX. There's no way on Earth that my parents will let me go after this. And I know that's not the only reason. There's more to it than that, so much more to it that has to do with the four of us—something I can't find the words to say but know in my head to be true.

Maes gets it. "AX is out."

Avery gazes at her. Curled up on the chair, she's like a kitten.

"There's always next year," I say, leaning back in my seat.

Mitchell shakes his head. "Yeah, for you maybe. But this is it for me."

Avery stares at him, wide-eyed.

"I'm graduating."

I think about that. This is Mitchell Harris's last day at Vulcan. His very last day. I think

about something else.

“College kids can still go to conventions.”

“I’m not going to college.” He leans forward in his seat. “I filled out the applications. I got into Alabama.” He knows I’m an Auburn fan. “But I decided on the military.”

When was there time for this? When did he make this decision? When was he going to tell us that he’d already decided that this was it?

“Figured this was going to be my last hurrah.” His honesty is blinding. There won’t be any Go Igarashi, any cosplay, any buying model kits, any late night ramen sessions in a hotel room. Maes and I won’t get to reenact any scene from Bebop; Avery and I won’t get to be Judy and Punch. You can dream as hard and as much as you want and still live to see that dream falter. You can fail. I thought we could do anything.

Avery cries big tears. Huge tears. She covers her eyes with her hands and bawls, back shaking, arms shaking, cries shaking. The secretary watches from across her desk. She wrinkles her nose at the noise, at Avery, and Maes gives her the dirtiest glare I’ve ever seen. The secretary goes back to taking calls.

We all shift closer to Avery. Maes rest her head on Avery’s left shoulder and I rest my head on Maes’s right and it’s never felt more what it is, more right.

I glance in Mitchell’s direction. He takes a breath, the biggest he’s ever taken, and rests his hand on Avery’s right shoulder and I know then that it’s over, it’s all really over. Dreams of AX. Dreams of us. And maybe this is all we were ever meant to do—console one another. Hold one another. Be there when the world seemed too wide and too tough.

We are not Kenji and Kenny, but maybe that’s what I wanted for the four of us. Some kind of indisputable En that meant we were supposed to know each other. Some proof that the

universe was working in our favor. That this was meant to be, because if it was then anything could be. Avery could be a mangaka, Maes could find acceptance, Mitchell could reconcile with his mother, I could learn to love the world and the world could learn to love me. I could stop being so damn afraid of everything and start really living. I could believe in things again like I did as a kid. Like I believed in Peter Pan and super heroes. Like I believe in Kenny and Kenji and the power that stretches across the ocean and brings them together.

Mitchell will graduate in three days and we'll be here, like we should, but we won't be with him. Avery will cry and Maes will smile and Mitchell and I will go on disliking each other the best way we can. In a year, when Maes and I graduate, we won't go off to form a rock band; Maes will be gone to some faraway school to fulfill some faraway dream and I'll be here in Birmingham trying, still, to fulfill mine. Trying to make music. And then only Avery will be left. Avery, who still has Aunt Shannon to deal with, Avery who cracks when she thinks she's alone.

But even that'll be all right. It'll all be all right. Avery, Maes, Mitchell, and I, we'll be manga lords no longer. We'll just be kids, trying, to the best of our abilities, to be lords of our universes. We'll be friends—not like we are now. We'll never be this far and this close again. But we'll remember what we strove for. We'll remember how hard we worked, how hard we loved. We almost made it. We were so close. We were so good together and we didn't even know it and maybe that's what we're really losing here.

We weren't perfect. We weren't the kind of friends that last forever, but we built something powerful, a world where our dreams seemed possible. And that was important and needed. It was real.

-End-