

a thousand broken Pieces

INTERNATIONAL BESTELLING AUTHOR

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Tillie Cole

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A Thousand Broken Pieces

Tillie Cole hails from a small town in the northeast of England. She grew up on a farm with her English mother, Scottish father, older sister, and a multitude of rescue animals. As soon as she could, Tillie left her rural roots for the bright lights of the big city. After graduating from Newcastle University with a BA Hons in religious studies, Tillie followed her professional rugby player husband around the world for a decade, becoming a teacher in between, and thoroughly enjoyed teaching high school students social studies before putting pen to paper and finishing her first novel.

After several years living in Italy, Canada, and the USA, Tillie has now settled back in her hometown in England with her husband and two children. Tillie is both an independent and traditionally published author and writes many genres, including contemporary romance, dark romance, YA, and NA. When she is not writing, Tillie enjoys nothing more than spending time with her little family, curling up on her couch watching movies, drinking far too much coffee, and convincing herself that she really doesn't need that last square of chocolate.

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For those who have lost a loved one, I walk with you.
For those who have lost a piece of their heart, I hold your hand.
For those who don't know how to move on,
I pray this book gives you solace.

For Dad.
I will miss you forever.
Until we see each other again.
"Endure Fort"

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"I have come to understand that death, for the sick, is not so hard to endure. For us, eventually our pain ends, we go to a better place. But for those left behind, their pain only magnifies."

—POPPY, *A THOUSAND BOY KISSES*

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Prologue

Savannah
Age thirteen
Blossom Grove, Georgia

I couldn't hear anything but the deafening beating of my heart. Too fast in rhythm, thundering like the destructive summer storms that ripped through Georgia when the heat soared.

My breathing grew labored as my lungs began to slowly cease to function. The air that was in my chest hardened into granite boulders, pushing down on me so hard that I was frozen in place. Frozen looking at Poppy fading away in the bed. Seeing my parents clutching on to one another like they were dying too. Their baby, their first daughter losing her fight with cancer before our very eyes, death hovering beside her like an ominous shadow, readying to take her away. Aunt DeeDee stood with her arms wrapped around her waist as though it was the only thing keeping her standing.

I felt Ida squeezing my hand so hard she could have broken bones. I felt my younger sister's slight body trembling, no doubt with fear or pain or complete disbelief that this could actually be real.

That this was *actually* happening.

My face was soaked with the tears that fell in rapids from my eyes.

"Savannah? Ida?" my mama said softly. I blinked through the watery

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haze until I saw my mama before us. I began to shake my head, my body seeming to jerk back to life from its numbed, catatonic state.

"No…" I whispered, feeling Ida's terrified gaze fix onto me. "Please…" I added, my near silent plea drifting into vapor in the stagnant air around us.

Mama bent down and ran her trembling hand down my cheek. "You need to say goodbye, baby." Her voice wobbled—hoarse and exhausted. She looked over her shoulder, to where Rune was sitting on the bed, laying kiss after kiss on my older sister's hands, her fingers, her face, looking at his Poppymin like he always had—like she had been designed solely for him. A choked cry escaped my lips as I watched them.

It wasn't real. This *couldn't* be real. She couldn't leave him. She couldn't leave *us*…

"Girls," Mama pushed again, urgency in her tone. My heart fractured when Mama's bottom lip began to tremble. "She…" Mama closed her eyes, trying to gather some kind of composure, cutting off whatever she was going to say. I didn't know how she did it. I couldn't. I couldn't face this. I couldn't *do* this.

"Sav," Ida said from beside me. I turned to look at my little sister. At her dark hair, green eyes, and deep-set dimples, her skin, which was red from crying. At her sweet, heartbroken face. "We have to." Her voice was shaking. But she nodded her head at me in encouragement. Right now, Ida had more strength than I could muster.

Ida stood, never loosening her iron-tight grip on my hand as she guided me up. When I was on my feet, I glanced down at our clasped hands. Soon, this is how it would forever be. Just our two hands, no third to hold, to guide us.

I followed behind Ida, each step feeling like I was wading through molasses as we approached the bed. It was positioned to look out of the window. So Poppy could see outside. Falling pink and white cherry blossom petals drifted by on the breeze, scattering onto the ground as they dropped from the trees. Rune looked up as we approached, but I couldn't meet his eyes. I wasn't strong enough to see him at that moment. The moment we had all been dreading. The one, deep down, I never really believed would arrive.

As I took as deep a breath as I could, Ida and I rounded the bed. The first

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thing I heard was Poppy's breathing. It had changed. It was deep and rattly, and I could see the exhaustion, the struggle on her pretty face…

The effort it was taking her to simply hold on for just a few minutes more. To remain with us for as long as she could. Yet, despite it all, she widened her smile when she saw us. Her sisters. Her best friends.

Our Poppy…the best person I had ever known.

Lifting her thin, frail hands, Poppy held one out for each of us to hold. I closed my eyes when I felt how cold she was, how weak her grip was now.

"I love you, Poppy," Ida whispered. I opened my eyes and fought not to fall to the floor as Ida laid her head on Poppy's chest and held her tightly. Poppy closed her eyes and pressed the ghost of a kiss on Ida's head.

"I love…you too…Ida," she replied, holding on to our younger sister like she would never let her go. Ida was Poppy's double in every way—her personality, her looks, her always-positive outlook on life. Poppy's fingers ran through Ida's dark hair. "Never change," she murmured as Ida lifted her head. Poppy placed her weakening hand on Ida's cheek.

"I won't," Ida said, her voice breaking as she stood back, reluctantly letting her hand fall from Poppy's. I focused on that release. I didn't know why, but I wanted Ida to hold on to our sister. Maybe if we just held on to her, together, Poppy wouldn't have to go, maybe we could keep her here where she was safe…

"Sav…" Poppy whispered, her eyes shining as I met her gaze.

I crumbled, my face falling as I began to sob. "Poppy…" I said, taking hold of her hand and holding it to me. I was shaking my head, over and over, silently begging God, the universe, *anyone* to stop this, to bless us with a miracle and keep her here with us, even if it was for just a bit longer.

"I'm…okay…" Poppy said, cutting through my silent pleas. Her hand was trembling, I brought it to my lips, to press a kiss to her cold skin. But when I did, I saw that Poppy's hand was steady and the trembling was mine. Tears tumbled down my cheeks. "Savannah," Poppy said, "I am…ready…to go…"

"No," I said, shaking my head. I felt a hand land on my back and an arm thread around my waist. I knew it was Mama and Ida keeping me upright. "I'm not ready… I need you… You're my older sister!… I need you, Poppy."

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My chest ached to the point of pain, and I knew it was my heart splintering into tiny fragmented pieces.

"I'll…always be…with…you," Poppy said, and I noticed a sallowness to her skin, heard the terrifying rattle in her breathing deepen and grow more erratic. *No…no, no, no…* "We will…" Poppy sucked in a faint breath, a *fading* gasp of air, "meet again…"

"Poppy…" I managed to say, before racking sobs took hold of me. I lowered my head to Poppy's chest and felt her weak arms encase me. She may have been losing strength, but that hold felt like a secure blanket around me. I didn't want to let go.

"I …love you…Savannah. So…much," Poppy said, fighting her slowing breath to speak. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying in vain to hold on. Poppy pressed a kiss to my hair.

"Savannah." Mama's voice sailed into my ears. "Baby…" she murmured. I lifted my head and met Poppy's weak smile.

"I love you, Pops," I said. "You've been the best big sister I could ever ask for." Poppy swallowed and her eyes shimmered with tears. I studied her face. She was so close to leaving us. I memorized the green of her eyes, the natural streaks of warmth in her dark hair. She was pale now, but I held on to the memory of the peach tone of her soft skin. I held on to the memory of her sweet scent wrapping around me, to her face full of laughter and life.

I didn't want to let go of her hand, I didn't know if I ever would be able to, but as Mama squeezed my shoulders, I did, refusing to disconnect from her gaze until Mama and Daddy moved beside the bed and blocked her from my view.

I stumbled back, shock settling in. Ida gripped my hand and curled into my chest. I watched, almost dissociated, as Mama and Daddy kissed and held Poppy and said their goodbyes. White noise filled my ears as Mama and Daddy moved back and Rune approached the bed. I stayed, transfixed, Ida breaking down against my chest, Aunt DeeDee, Mama, and Daddy falling apart to the side of the room as Rune said something to Poppy, then leaned down and kissed her on her lips…

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I held my breath as, seconds later, he slowly reared back. And I watched

it. I watched Rune's face and saw in his shattered expression that she had gone. That Poppy had left us…

Rune's head was shaking as my heart was impossibly, cracking even more. Then he bolted from the room, and as he did, I slammed back into the here and now with a deafening crash. The sound of agonized crying was the first thing that greeted me, the devastating noises slicing my soul in half. I looked at Mama, then Daddy. Mama had fallen to the floor, Daddy trying to keep her in his arms. Aunt DeeDee was turned against the wall that was propping her up, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Sav," Ida cried, gripping tighter on to my waist. I held Ida close. Held her as I stared at the bed. Stared at Poppy's hand. Her hand that lay unmoving on the bed. Her *empty*, still hand. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion, like some camera trick used in the movies.

But this was real life. This was *our* house. And that was *my* beloved sister on the bed. On the bed with no one beside her.

Mama reached for Ida. My little sister fell into our parents' embrace, but I was moving forward like a magnet was drawing me close to Poppy. Like some invisible force, some transparent thread, was beckoning me to where she lay.

On a stuttered breath, I rounded the bed. And I stilled. I stilled as I stared down at Poppy. No breath came from her mouth. There was no rise of her chest, no flush to her cheeks. Yet, she was as beautiful in death as she was in life. Then my gaze dropped to her empty hand again. It was upturned, like it wanted to be held, just one last time.

So I sat on the edge of the bed and wrapped my hand in hers. And as I sat there, I felt something in me change. In that moment, I lost something in my soul that I knew I would never get back. I brought Poppy's cooling fingers to my lips and pressed a kiss to her soft skin. Then I lowered our entwined hands to my lap. And I didn't let go. I *wouldn't* let go.

I wasn't sure I ever could.

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1

Lost Breaths and Moving Clouds

Savannah
Age seventeen
Blossom Grove, Georgia

There were precisely forty-two cracks on the linoleum floor. Rob, the therapy leader, was talking, but all I heard was the tinny drone from the heating system whirring above us. My gaze was unfocused, catching only spears of daylight slicing through the high windows and the blurred outlines of the others in the circle around me.

"Savannah?" I blinked my eyes into focus, glancing up at Rob. He was smiling at me, body language open and an encouraging smile on his face. I shifted nervously on my seat. I wasn't blessed with the skill of talking out loud. I struggled to put words to the turbulent feelings stirring inside me. I was better on my own. Being around people for too long drained me; too many of them made me close in on myself. I was nothing like my sister, Ida, whose personality was infectious and gregarious.

Just like Poppy…

I swallowed the instant lump that sprouted in my throat. It had been almost four years. Four long, excruciating years without her, and I still couldn't think of her name or picture her pretty face without feeling my heart collapse on me like a mountain caving in. Without feeling the

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shadow of death's unyielding fingers wrap around my lungs and starve them of air.

The knowing pangs of anxiety immediately began clawing their way up from the depths of where they slumbered. Sinking their teeth into my veins and sending their poison flooding through my body until it had captured me as its unwilling hostage.

My palms grew damp and my breathing became heavy. "Savannah." Rob's voice had changed; even though it echoed in my ears as everything around me tunneled into a narrow void, I heard its worried inflection. Feeling the weight of everyone's stares on me, I jumped up from my seat and bolted for the door. My footsteps were an arrhythmic drumbeat as I followed the stream of light in the hallway toward the open air. I burst through the door to the outside and sucked in the wintery Georgia air.

Dancing spotlights invaded my vision, and I stumbled to the tree that sat in the grounds of the therapy center. I leaned on the heavy trunk, but my legs gave way and I dropped to the hard soil. I closed my eyes and laid my head against the wood, the rough bark scratching the back of my scalp. I focused on breathing, on trying to remember every lesson I had ever been taught about coping with an anxiety attack. But it never seemed to help. The attacks always held me hostage until they were finally willing to release me.

I was utterly exhausted.

My body trembled for what felt like an age, heart sputtering and lurching until I felt my lungs begin to loosen, my windpipe finally granting my body the oxygen it so badly craved. I inhaled through my nose and out through my mouth until I sagged farther into the tree, the smell of grass and earth breaking through anxiety's sensory-blocking fog.

I opened my eyes and looked up at the bright blue sky, watched the white clouds traveling up ahead, trying to find shapes in their structures. I watched them appear, then leave, and wondered what it looked like from up there, what they saw when they looked down upon us all, loving and losing and falling apart.

A droplet of water landed on the back of my hand. I glanced down, only to catch another drop fall on my ring finger's knuckle—they were coming from my cheeks. Exhaustion rippled over me, consuming all my strength. I

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couldn't even lift my hands to wipe away the tears. So I focused on watching the journeying clouds again, wishing I could be like them, constantly moving, never having time to stop to process and think.

Thinking gave me space to break.

I didn't even realize someone had sat down beside me until I felt a subtle shift in the air around me. The clouds still held my attention.

"Anxiety attack again?" Rob said. I nodded, my hair rubbing against the loose bark that was scarcely holding on to its home. Rob was only in his thirties. He was kind and was exceptional at what he did. He helped so many people. Over the past four years I'd seen a myriad of teenagers come through the therapy center's door and leave, changed, empowered, and able to function once more in the world.

I was simply broken.

I didn't know how to heal, how to put myself back together again. The truth was, when Poppy died, all light vanished from my world, and I'd been stumbling around in the dark ever since.

Rob didn't speak for a while but finally said, "We have to change tactics, Savannah." The edge of my lips lifted as I saw what looked like a daisy form in a cloud. Ida loved daisies. They were her favorite flower. Rob leaned back against the tree beside me, sharing the wide trunk. "We've received some funding." His words trickled into my ears one syllable at a time as the world, painstakingly slowly, began to stitch itself back together. "There's a trip," he said, letting that hang in the air between us. I blinked, the sun's afterimage dancing in the darkness when I squeezed my eyes shut to banish its blinding glow.

"I want you to go on it," Rob said. I froze and eventually turned my head to face him. Rob had short red hair, freckles, and piercing green eyes. He was a walking autumnal color palette. He was also a survivor. To say I admired him was an understatement. Punished as a teen for his sexuality by those who were meant to love him, he had fought his way through hell to reach freedom and happiness, now helping others who struggled in their own ways too.

"There's a trip… I want you to go on it…"

Those delayed words filtered into my brain and my old friend anxiety began to reemerge.

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"A small group from all over the States is going on a five-country journey. One of healing." He rolled his head to look up at the clouds that had previously captured my attention. "Teens dealing with grief."

I shook my head, every second making it more and more pronounced.

"I can't," I whispered, instant fear wrapping around my voice.

Rob's smile was sympathetic, but he said, "I've already spoken to your parents, Savannah. They've agreed it would be good for you. We've already secured your place."

"No!"

"You've already finished high school. And you've gotten into Harvard. *Harvard*, Savannah. That's incredible." Rob briefly paused to think but then added, "That's Boston. Far, far away from here."

I understood the subtext. I couldn't function at home, so how on earth would I function in another state at college?

When Poppy died, I threw myself into my studies. I had to occupy my mind at all times. It was how I stayed above water. I had always been studious. I had always been the smart one. The bookworm. The one who talked of physics and equations and molecular structures. Ida was the loud one, the dramatic sister, the funny one, capturing all the attention—in all the best ways. And Poppy…Poppy had been the dreamer. She had been the believer, the creative one, the one with music and never-ending happiness and hope in her heart.

The one who would have changed the world.

When Pops died, I couldn't face school anymore—people's stares, the sorrowful glances, the spotlight that followed me around, broadcasting me as the girl who had watched her older sister die. So I homeschooled, and I graduated early. Harvard accepted me; I'd done enough to get in. But with all my schoolwork complete, my newly found time became my enemy. Idle hours spent reliving Poppy fading, her slowly dying before us. Endless minutes that gave my anxiety breathing room to strike, to draw out its advances like mercenaries toying with an easy target. I felt Poppy's absence like a noose pulling tighter around my neck day by day.

"I know it might seem frightening. I know it's something you might not believe you can do," Rob said, his voice gentle and encouraging. "But

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you *can*, Savannah. I believe in you." I felt my bottom lip tremble as I met his eyes. "I'm not giving up." A gentle smile. "We're going to get you through this. We're going to get you to Harvard this fall. And you're going to thrive."

I wanted to smile back, to show my appreciation for him even thinking of me, for never quitting on me, but nerves held me back. New people. New places. Unknown lands—it was utterly terrifying. But I had no fight left in me to contest it. And Lord, nothing else had worked for me. Four long years of individual and group therapy hadn't been able to lift me back up or put me back together again. I was too tired to argue. So I turned my head again and stared back up at the sky. A large cloud rolled in, and I stilled.

It looked exactly like a cello.

I entered Blossom Grove to the symphonic soundtrack of singing birds. No matter the time of year, there was always something unearthly about this place. A slice of heaven placed down on Earth, a glimpse of the celestial, of peace. Or maybe it was just whose spirit rested here that made it so special. Protecting the place that she adored so much.

The trees were bare, the buds of the blossoms not yet ready to show us their beauty, winter keeping them at bay for just a little while longer. But it didn't make the grove any less beautiful. I breathed in the fresh air that whistled through the brown branches until my feet led me to the tree that protected my best friend.

The white marble headstone shone like an angel in the lowering sun, dusk blanketing the grave in idyllic golden hues. Poppy Litchfield stood out in golden writing, Forever Always etched underneath.

I wiped some fallen leaves from the top of the headstone and sat down before it. "Hello, Poppy," I said, already feeling my throat grow tight. I knew that for many, four years after the death of a loved one was enough for them to find their way back to some kind of life. To move on in whatever way they could. Yet for me, four years may have well been four minutes. It felt like only yesterday that Poppy left us—left Ida and me. Left Mama and Daddy and

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Aunt DeeDee. Left Rune. The fractures that splintered through my heart were still open and unhealed.

Those four years had not changed a thing. A pause button had been pressed that day. And I hadn't been able to press play since.

I pressed a kiss to my fingers, then placed them on the headstone. It was warm under my hand from the sun that always spotlighted in this grove, letting the world know that someone truly beautiful resided here.

I peered down and saw a photograph stuck to the bottom of the headstone. Tears pricked my eyes as I stared in awe at the stunning scene it boasted. The northern lights were captured perfectly in the picture, greens and blues soaring across a star-spattered black sky.

Rune.

Rune had been here. He always did this. Every time he came home, he would spend hours at Poppy's grave, under their favorite tree. Spend the day talking to his only love, his soulmate, telling her about his life at NYU. About the apprenticeship he had secured with a Pulitzer Prize–winning photographer. About his travels around the world, visiting far off countries and sights—like the northern lights—that he would always capture on film and then bring home for Poppy to see.

"So she won't miss out on new adventures," he would tell me.

Then there were the days when he would visit Poppy, and I would sit behind a nearby tree, unnoticed and hidden, and listen to him speak to her. When tears would cascade from my eyes at the unfairness of the world. At us losing the brightest star in our skies, at Rune losing half of his heart. As far as I knew, he had never dated anyone else. He told me once that he would never feel about anyone else the way he felt about Poppy and that although their time together was short, it had been enough to last him a lifetime.

I had never experienced a love like theirs. I wasn't sure many did. Where Ida searched and prayed for a Rune-and-Poppy-type love, I feared it would only cause me more pain. What if I lost them too? How would I ever cope? I didn't know how Rune survived each day. I didn't know how he opened his eyes every sunrise and simply *breathed*. I'd never asked him. I'd never found the courage.

"I had another attack today," I told Poppy, leaning against her headstone.

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I rested my head against the warm marble. Drank in the soothing birdsong that always kept her company. After several silent minutes, I pulled out the notebook from my bag. The one I had never dared open. I traced the words *For Savannah* written on the cover in Poppy's handwritten script.

The notebook she had left to me. The one I had never read or even opened. I didn't know why. Perhaps it was because I was too scared to read what Poppy had to say, or perhaps it was because it was the final piece I had left of her, and once it was opened, once I'd finished the very last word, then she was truly gone.

I hugged the notebook to my chest. "They're sending me away, Pops," I said, my quiet voice carrying around the near-silent grove. "To try to make me better." I sighed, the heaviness in my chest almost bruising my ribs. "I just don't know how to let you go."

The truth was, if Poppy could talk to me, I knew she'd be heartbroken at how her death had paralyzed me, wounded me irreparably. Yet, I couldn't shake it. Rob told me that grief never left us. Instead we adapted, like it was a new appendage we had to learn to use. That at any moment, pain and heartache could strike and break us. But eventually we would develop the tools to cope with it and find a way to move on.

I was still waiting for that day.

I watched the setting sun disappear through the trees, the waxing crescent moon rising to take its place. The golden blanket adorning us turned to a silvery blue as night arrived and I stood to leave. "I love you, Pops," I said and reluctantly walked through the grove to our home. Our home, that these days, missed its heartbeat.

Because she was buried in the ground behind me. Eternally seventeen. The age I was now. Never to grow old. Never to shine her light. Never to share her music.

A travesty the world would forever be deprived of.

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2

Abandoned Dreams and Frozen Ponds

Cael
Age Eighteen
Massachusetts

"It isn't happening," I said, staring down at my mom and dad on the couch. I stood in the center of the living room, seething, body live-wired with anger as I listened to what they were saying.

A morsel of guilt tried to carve its way into my heart as I watched my mom's tears spill over her eyes and track down her cheeks, but the fire flooding my veins burned that flicker of remorse to vapor.

"Cael, please…" Mom whispered, hands held out, placating. She shifted to the edge of the couch, like she would come to me, to offer me some kind of comfort. I shook my head, taking three steps back until I was almost on top of the unlit fireplace. I didn't want her comfort. I didn't want *any* of this. What were they even *thinking* right now?

My dad sat on our ancient brown couch, stoic, like the upstanding lawman he was. He was still dressed in his uniform, Massachusetts's Finest glaring at me, face reddened as Mom cried over me *again*.

My jaw clenched so hard I felt my bones might crack. My hands curled into tight fists, and I fought the urge to plow them into the brick of the fireplace my back now brushed up against. But that was my every day in this

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hellhole. In this house full of memories I no longer wanted to have lodged in my brain. My dad was sick and tired of patching up holes I'd made in the walls with my fist. Just as sick as I was of my constant stream of anger. But that anger never left me. So I guess we both weren't getting what we wanted.

"You're going, kid," Dad said, authority lacing each of his words. He was a man of few words. Succinct, and expected his orders to be obeyed. Everything inside of me screamed to tell him where the hell to go. His hard tone was fuel to the flames inside of me. I tried. I really tried to keep calm. But I was losing it. Like a ticking time bomb, I could feel I was about to blow.

"Cael, we have to try something," Mom said, a subtle plea in her broken voice. Once upon a time, my mom upset would break me. Now? Nothing. "We've talked to your newest therapist. You graduated from high school last year. You refused to start college. This trip can help you. Give you back some purpose. Now, you just exist. No job, no direction, no school, no hockey. We've talked to the coach at Harvard. He checks in on you all the time. He still wants you. He wants you on next year's roster. You can do this. You can still go—"

"I DON'T FUCKING CARE ABOUT COLLEGE!" I screamed, cutting off what she was about to say. I *had* cared about college once. It was all I thought about. All I *dreamed* about. So I could join *him*, so that we could play side by side, like we'd always planned…

My eyes involuntarily went to the mass of pictures on the wall above my parents on the couch. Shot after shot of me and him throughout the years. Playing in stadiums, arms around one another, smiles on our faces and sticks in our hands, Team USA written across my chest. I wasn't even sure how to smile anymore. It felt foreign for my facial muscles to function that way. I averted my gaze from those pictures—now a goddamn shrine to what could have been. I couldn't even look at them. They were all a lie. Told a story of a life that was fictitious.

Nothing about those days was real.

"I'm not going," I said, a dark warning in my tone. But my dad remained unfazed. He got to his feet. His broad and tall frame had once towered over me, but my six-foot-four height put me three inches above him now, my broad shoulders and athletic body matching his in strength and power. "I'll

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never forgive you for this," I spat, my mom's quiet cries in the background ricocheting off the constant shield I held around me. Nothing seemed to penetrate these days.

Dad put his hands in his pockets. "Then that's something I'm just gonna have to live with, kid."

I knew there was no changing his mind.

I vibrated on the spot, searing heat rushing through me like I was made of lava. Without glancing at my mom, I fled for the door, slamming it on my way out of the house. I threw myself into my Jeep. My breath turned to white mist as it met the frigid cold. Snow lay deep on the surrounding fields, and my boots were soaked through just from the walk from my house to the drive. Winter held New England firmly in its clenched fist.

I put my hands on the steering wheel, squeezing the leather. Like it did every time I got behind the wheel, that night came crashing back into my mind. My hands shook just by sitting in the Jeep. My breath grew labored, and I felt weak, so goddamn weak at how the memories took me down, at how just sitting in a car could ruin me, that I gave myself over to the anger inside. I let it flood my body, hot and livid, until I shook from it. My muscles grew so tight in my chest that they ached. I gritted my teeth, letting the boiling-hot flames inside of me sear any trace of who I was before. I let it build and build, from my toes to my scalp until it was all I was made of. Then I let it take over. I handed over the reins and roared out into the night, full of all the fury that was trying to escape. I slammed my hands on the steering wheel, kicked out my leg until my foot collided with the stereo system, knocking it out of the dashboard until it hung, suspended before me.

When my voice grew hoarse and all my breath was expelled, I stayed tense in the seat and glared at the rural white farm-style house that was once my sanctuary. I *hated* this place now. My gaze flickered to the top right window, and a slice of pain managed to sneak through, stabbing at my heart. "No," I hissed, and I averted my eyes from that bedroom. *Not now*. I wasn't letting that pain in now.

I tried to move the car. But for a moment, I was paralyzed. Caught in the Purgatory I'd been thrust into a year ago. When everything had flipped on

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a dime and the cookie-cutter mask that had disguised our idyllic family life was firmly yanked off—

I closed my eyes and let the fire take over. Slamming the key into the ignition, I opened my eyes and skidded out of the drive, the tires scrambling to find purchase on the black ice that coated our dirt driveway. I smelled rubber burning as I pushed the accelerator to its max. The fear of driving was there, like a low-grade fever threatening to spike. But I held it down. Just let myself burn and eviscerate any of the emotion that tried to edge through.

It had to be this way. I couldn't sink back to that place where everything was empty and lacking—a sinkhole that was impossible to climb out of. Instead, I leaned into this visceral rage that now controlled me. I gave myself over to hate—of the world, of people, of everything that stood to expose what I'd buried down deep.

But mostly, I focused on hating *him*. The hatred and fury I had toward him were a roaring pyre doused with gasoline.

I blinked, coming back into myself. I had driven without direction, without thought, lost in my head, and found myself approaching the one place I tried to stay away from.

We have to try something…

My mom's words ran on a loop inside my brain. *No,* they wanted me gone. They wanted to get rid of the son who was causing them strife. Me! No talk of the *other* son. But me, the one who remained. The one *he* had left behind. The one he hadn't even cared about when did what he did…

The first sign of my chest collapsing began to needle into my sternum. Frantically, I pulled into a parking bay and threw the driver's door open. The chill from Massachusetts's harsh winter slapped against my skin. My black Henley, beanie, and ripped jeans did nothing to stave off the cold. But I let it sink into my bones. I *wanted* to hurt. It was the only time I was reminded that I was still alive. That and the anger that had tunneled into my soul a year ago and had only grown in strength ever since.

Before I knew it, my feet were moving. I passed car after car, recognizing each one as I did. What was I even doing here? I didn't *want* to be here, yet my feet kept propelling me forward. They took me in through the side door, where the sounds that were once like home to me now felt distant and no

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longer part of my life. Low voices shouting calls, sticks slapping against ice, and pucks and blades cutting through glass.

Yet, I felt nothing.

Climbing the stairs higher and higher, I didn't stop until I was in the nosebleeds, well out of sight. I sat down on the hard plastic seat and threaded my hands together. Every muscle in my body was tight as my eyes focused on the ice. As I watched my former friends and teammates practicing. Making runs, breakaways, and dekes. Firing shot after shot at Timpson, the goalie who rarely let anything pass. His nickname wasn't Shut Out for nothing.

"Here!" the most familiar voice called, cutting through the arena, and I felt a sharp stab in my stomach.

Eriksson powered forward, taking the puck, and soared up the ice. With a perfectly aimed shot, it sailed into the net, lighting up the lamp.

I used to be *right there* beside him.

My leg bounced in agitation, and I fought to not inhale the freshness of the ice, to feel the sharpness of the cold air filling the arena. I pulled off my beanie and ran my hand through my dark hair. The tattoos on the backs of my hands stood out against my paler skin. Tattoos. So many tattoos and piercings now covered my body, just about erasing any sign of the person I was before.

I closed my eyes when the sounds of warring hockey sticks and boards being slammed into began to instigate a migraine from hell. Jumping to my feet, I pounded down the stairs toward the side door. I had just made it to the hallway when I heard, "Woods?"

I froze mid-step. Heard the sound of Eriksson leaving the ice, bladed feet awkwardly running on the hard surface behind me. But I kept moving, I kept going, avoiding my former best friend until a framed jersey mounted on the arena wall stopped me dead in my tracks. Woods 33 stood proudly in the hallway. In Memoriam was written on a bronze plaque above it, an individual team picture with his smiling face beaming back at me.

It was a punch right to my gut. I hadn't been prepared for it. It had sneaked through. It had struck unannounced—

"*Cael!*" Eriksson's voice was closer now. I turned my head and saw him approaching, and my heart started to slam against my ribs. The look of hope

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and excitement on his face almost made my legs give out. "Cael! You should have told me you were coming." Stephan Eriksson was breathless from trying to catch me. He still held his stick from the practice he'd just run out on, and pulled off his helmet, placing it on the floor by his bladed feet. I just stared at him. I couldn't make myself move.

He'd been there with me. He'd seen it all *with* me.

Eriksson's attention flickered to the framed jersey before me, sadness engulfing his expression. "Coach had it put up a couple of months back. Said some really nice things about him. You were invited, but…"

Shivers ran up my spine, causing every inch of skin on my body to break out in goose bumps. I could see Stephan studying how I looked now. See him looking at my tattooed hands and chest and neck. See him tracking my pierced nose and bottom lip, the black gauges in my ears.

"I've been trying to get a hold of you, man," he said, trying to edge closer. He gestured to the direction of the ice. "For months. We miss you." He took a deep breath. "*I* miss you. It's not the same without you, brother."

Brother…

That word was like a machete slicing my chest, splitting me where I stood. Feeling the familiar fire melt the ice that had built in me the minute I stepped into this arena, I spat, "I'm not your brother." Then, looking at the framed jersey that hovered like an omen beside me, I slammed my fist right into the center of the navy-blue number 33. I felt the broken glass dig into my knuckles and the warmth of my blood hit my skin as it began to drip down to my wrist.

"*Jesus,* Woods! Stop!" Stephan shouted, but I was already pushing out of the exit door and into the darkening winter evening. I ran across the lot, lungs burning, and jumped into my car, ignoring Stephan trying to signal me down from the side door.

What the hell had I been thinking, coming here?

I skidded out of the parking lot, trying to stop my hands from shaking. That frame. That framed jersey. *Why did they have to do that? Why did I have to* see *that?*

I drove and drove, pushing the speed limit, but couldn't stop my hands from shaking. Was this what he'd felt like when he'd roared down the road?

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When he'd done what he did? My blood trickled down my arm. My knuckles were split open, wounds raw.

But worse, I could smell my blood.

Blood…

The coppery scent immediately yanked me back to the moment I prayed I could forget. The one that was as tattooed onto my brain as deeply as the black and red ink on my neck. I felt my breathing stutter, the white puffs of smoke bursting into misty staccato balls before me. My stomach swirled, the fire I held on to like a crutch extinguishing by the second as that night came tumbling back.

I made a harsh right turn onto the dirt road that led to home but slammed my foot on my brakes halfway up, at the pond. I was panting like I'd just run a marathon. I couldn't be in the car. It was too enclosed, too stifling, reminded me too much of that night…

Jumping from the driver's seat, I ran to the pond, inky thick ice coating its surface. I stopped at the edge, head tilted back as I stared at the darkening sky.

In memoriam…

A choked, strangled sound wrenched from my throat. I bent down, palms flattening on the ice. Anything to ground me. *Christ*. How did we even get here? How had it all gone so wrong?

Why hadn't he said anything? Why hadn't he just *talked* to me—

Throwing my head back, I screamed into the night sky, hearing sleeping birds fleeing from the surrounding trees. I slowly stood, throat raw, body jumping with adrenaline, and moved to the shed that I hadn't opened in I didn't know how long.

Placing my bloodied hand on the handle, I wrenched it open and found my old skates staring back at me. I ignored the punch to the gut I received when I saw the second pair leaning beside them.

Grabbing mine, I kicked off my boots, not caring if my socks were soaked through as they slapped on the snow. I slipped them on and felt nauseous as that familiar rush of *rightness* took me in its hold. I glanced up at the sticks that stared back at me like they had a soul, like they had memories that lay trapped in the layers of wood.

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Before I could overthink it, I grabbed for the one with black and gold tape—Bruins colors. As I held it, it felt sacrilegious. I never believed I deserved to hold this stick. How could I when it belonged to my hero? The one who'd taught me everything I knew. The one I'd looked up to, emulated, laughed with and run to. The one who'd shone so bright he lit up the whole friggin' sky.

Now, I was permanently stuck under his eclipse.

Instinctively moving to the pond, I placed my right blade on the ice and pushed off until I was gliding along the surface. The harsh wind slapped at my face. My lungs, which felt like they'd forgotten how to function, drank in a long gasp of air. The tip of the stick in my hands dragged across the pond's frozen surface. I tapped it back and forth like I was passing a puck in between. It came as natural to me as breathing. *This*. Ice. Hockey.

I closed my eyes as I circled the pond. And like I had slipped into another plane, I heard the distant echo of two kids laughing…

"You think you can take me, kid?" Cillian's deep voice rang out over the snow and wind as I ran toward him, stealing the puck from under him. "Hey!" he laughed and chased me down the pond at what felt like a million miles an hour. These days, he couldn't catch me. When I slipped it through the two branches that made up our makeshift goal, he wrapped his arms around me, swooping me off the ice. "You're better than me now, kid. How the hell did that happen?"

The smile on my face was so wide my cheeks ached. I shrugged.

"You know that, right?" Cillian said, releasing me and circling where I stood. "You're gonna go all the way. Everyone sees it. All eyes are on you."

I didn't see it. Cill was the best hockey player I'd ever seen. I was pretty sure I would never measure up. He was older than me and was the star of every team he'd ever been on. Ever since I could remember, I'd wanted to be just like him.

"It's in the stars, kid," he said, roughing at my messy hair with his gloved hand. "We'll play at Harvard together, then hit the big time. NHL, All Stars. Olympics." He smiled and pressed a kiss to my head. "Together, yeah?"

"Together," I replied, feeling like the luckiest kid in the world. Me and Cillian. Together, the two of us could conquer the world…

A sinking feeling pressed onto my shoulders, a ten-ton weight pushing me down into the ground. I opened my eyes, only to find myself standing

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in the dark, in the middle of our neglected and abandoned pond. Alone. No future we'd dreamed of waiting before us. No *Woods Brothers* conquering the world. Just me, and the specter of my brother hovering over me like a vacuum, sucking anything good and light into its ravenous void.

The wood of the hockey stick groaned in my hands as my fingers wrapped around it like a vice. The longer I stood there, immobile, fury filled the emptiness in my soul and built and built until I lifted that stick high and slammed it down into the ice with every bit of strength I could obtain, shattering and splintering it into a thousand broken pieces.

Our dreams were shattered now too, so what was one more casualty in this shit show of a situation? Pushing back off the ice, I shucked off my skates, kicking them into the mass of overgrown, leafless trees surrounding me, and slumped back to the ground.

You're going, kid…

Dad may have well been behind me as for how loud his voice was in my head. I was eighteen. And about to go on a trip around the world with others apparently "like me." I was eighteen and should be working toward the future I'd dreamed of. But the one I had been promised had been stolen from me by the one I loved most, the one I *trusted* most in this world. Nothing else mattered anymore. I was completely alone.

And for such a long time now, I hadn't even found it within myself to care.

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Timid Hearts and First Sights

Savannah
New York

"Are you all packed?"

I looked up from where I was sitting on the edge of the hotel bed, lost in thought.

Ida stood before me, her long, dark hair down in soft waves and a dimpled smile on her pretty face. Mama and Daddy had brought me to New York to catch the flight to our first stop on the therapy trip. We were to meet in the airport, where I would meet the rest of the kids going, and our two therapists, of course. I had video-called with the therapists a few times and they seemed nice. It didn't take my nerves away though.

Ida had refused to stay behind in Georgia, insisting on coming to see me off.

I pressed my hand over my closed suitcase. "I think so." Ida had shared a room with me last night. She'd regaled me with stories from school and the latest gossip from the cheer squad she was part of.

If sunshine was personified, it was Ida Litchfield.

Ida dropped beside me on the bed and threaded her hand through mine. I stared at our intertwined fingers, her bright pink polish next to my clear. Ida placed her head on my shoulder, and just that simple act of sisterly affection brought a lump to my throat.

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"I don't want to go," I confessed on a whisper, feeling the fluttering in my heart that ignited the anxiety I knew was preparing to strike.

Ida squeezed my hand. "I know…" She trailed off, and I knew she had stopped herself from saying more. I waited, unsure if I wanted to hear it. But then, with a shaky inhale she said, "But I need you to." The sudden sadness in her tone was a knife straight through the heart.

I stilled at her confession and turned my head to look at her. She kept her face down, head tucked into the curve of my neck.

"Ida—"

"Please…" she said, quietly begging, then slowly raised her head. It gutted me to see her usually happy eyes crushed with sadness. A sheen of tears washed over her green irises. My heart began to race. Ida glanced at the window showcasing JFK Airport, then looked back to me. "I need my sister back," she finally said, and I felt that knife slice even deeper. I wanted to say something, but guilt infused my cells, making it impossible.

"Losing Pops…" Ida trailed off, a lone tear spilling over her left cheek. I dusted it away with my thumb. Ida gave me an echo of a grateful smile.

She took a deep breath. "Losing Pops was the hardest thing I've ever gone through in my life." I placed my free hand on her knee. "But seeing Mama and Daddy in the aftermath…seeing *you*…" Ida paused, and I knew she was back there, reliving those first few months after Poppy's death. The darkest days we had ever endured. The aftermath, the *knowing* that nothing would ever be the same again. "Seeing what it did to you all…that hurt most of all. My family. My perfect, beautiful family was irreparably hurt, and I couldn't do anything to make it better. Mama and Daddy were crumbling. Poppy, *our* perfect Poppy had gone, and I missed her so much I couldn't breathe, but…" Ida cut herself off.

I tugged her closer. "What? Please, tell me."

Ida shifted and looked me in the eyes. "But I knew I had you. I wanted to cling to you, Savannah. To be sure you didn't leave me too."

My breathing stuttered. Ida was so young when it all happened. Old enough to remember it all but too young that it must have been almost impossible to process her grief.

"I used to sneak into your room at night, just to be sure you were breathing."

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