

## ABSTRACT

This creative thesis is composed of two elements: the critical introduction that puts the work into the context of literary canon followed by an excerpt from the novel that I hope to publish after graduation: *The Vulture*. The novel explores ideas around self-esteem, sexuality and relationships with other people, and coming-of-age in a fantasy-esque way. The pages in this thesis are the first forty pages of the novel. The main character, Willa Carter, navigates new relationships as she begins high school, and the thesis cuts off right as she kisses the character that readers later discover to be the fantasy villain.

## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Willa Carter, the main character of *The Vulture*, lives with her slightly absent mother and father and is terrified to start high school. She is young, insecure, and the story starts off with more child-like and normal themes. However, as the novel continues, darker fantasy elements become more incorporated into the plot as she discovers that things may not be what they seem. *The Vulture* twists the typical, traditional non-fictional coming-of-age story by having an in-human villain, emphasizing the complex nature of trust and relationships.

At the beginning of the novel, Willa is established to have a best friend named Ainsley, but they end up growing apart after Willa makes new friends once she reaches high school: Grayson, Safiya, and Mira. Each of these characters are raw and complex characters whose interactions with Willa highlight the intricate and tangled nature of relationships. As the novel progresses, Willa struggles between her internal growing feelings for Mira and the societal pressures pushing her to be with Grayson. In this creative thesis, Willa kisses both Mira and Grayson, the thesis ending as we see the contrast between these two moments and her feelings on each. The novel continues to reveal that Grayson is a vulture-like monster who has lured Willa into his trap, which is heavily foreshadowed by the title, vultures beginning to flock Willa's home throughout the plot, and Mira's painting in art class, which creates the plot twist in the novel where Willa realizes that Mira has been in on Grayson's plan the entire time.

Mira's character is meant to be a complex one, as she is simultaneously in love with Willa whilst plotting her death at the same time. Willa sees her throughout the entire creative thesis as an idol, worshipping her, falling in love with her, and also feeling insecure about herself in comparison to Mira. We do see moments where Willa begins to doubt Mira, like her drinking alcohol at the party and shoplifting at the mall, but we also see that Willa begins to change and adapt as she wants to be more like Mira. While Grayson is a clear-cut villain, who appears strange and slightly off from the moment of his introduction, Mira is someone who Willa

whole-heartedly loves and trusts, making it that much more of a betrayal when Willa sees Grayson in his monstrous form for the first time and realizes that it is the same monster in Mira's painting.

The comparison in literature that I would draw to this type of betrayal would be Gale in the third *Hunger Games* book when Katniss discovers that he was involved in designing and dropping bombs on a group of people, killing them all, that included her sister. Gale loves Katniss and expresses this to her throughout the series, but at the end of the day, his selfish motives come before all else. Mira is similarly motivated by selfish behaviors and preserving herself, letting this come before her love for Willa, but I think that the execution of this betrayal reads differently in my novel seeing as we are not following a more heteronormative tradition.

Willa's exploration of her feelings for Mira and Grayson is an important aspect of *The Vulture*. I wanted to present sexuality here with the contrast of what the main character believes is expected of her versus what she is actually feeling. Willa is an inherently insecure and naive character, and it is clear that she is highly motivated by appearances and what she believes will better her own status. However, I wanted the reader to understand that there is more to her than meets the eye as she begins to learn and grow. She is meant to be juvenile at the beginning of the story— she is honestly even meant to be somewhat unlikable. The point of her relationships with Mira, Grayson, Ainsley, and others is that she realizes after her discovery that Grayson is a monster what elements of her life are truly important to her.

As a bisexual author, it was important to me to navigate ideas around discovering sexuality and comparing and contrasting Willa's relationships to the man in her life versus the woman. The romantic tension between her and Mira adds to the naturally complicated aspect of her relationship because we see Mira wrestling with the fact that she is knowingly sending Willa into her own death, seeing her cry after Willa drops her off after their homecoming dance. Mira is designed to be a character who is difficult to hate, which is why it is so important that Grayson is this fictional monster. Grayson is the villain that we all see coming: he is strange from the

beginning and never really connects with Willa on a deeper level, so seeing his almost exaggerated level of villainy in contrast to Mira, who is not necessarily a villain and is an actual human being made of flesh and blood, creates an interesting parallel between the two.

Ainsley, Willa's childhood best friend, is a much more abstracted character. She is someone that the reader does not ever fully meet and is rather only introduced in snippets from Willa's commentary on her. It is revealed to Willa after her and Grayson's kiss, directly after the creative thesis cuts off, that Ainsley is dead, and Grayson has murdered her. Ainsley is less of a character and more a direct symbol of Willa's innocence— in a way, she was always destined to die, because Willa was always eventually going to undergo a loss of innocence. My ideas for how to portray Ainsley were loosely based off of the television show *Never Have I Ever*, which is another coming of age story that follows a young teenage girl who has to navigate herself and her relationships with other people. Her dad has passed away when the show starts and throughout the show we see flashbacks of him, memories, and dream sequences where he is portrayed as an almost perfect character. He is the saint, he was always closer to the main character, and this creates tension between her and her mother as he always kept the peace between the two of them. Because Ainsley is meant to be a symbol of childhood innocence, we never see any flaws that would turn a reader against her, only traits that would make her more human and more naive. Losing her is something that Willa has to go through in order to grow, change, and learn the lessons in order for her to be the person she needs to be by the end of the novel.

Another piece of symbolism we see throughout the novel is the jewelry that Willa is gifted. Willa wears a ring that Ainsley gifted to her as her eighth grade graduation present with her birthstone. They wear matching rings to each other, and Willa cherishes this ring. After her kiss with Grayson, she discovers that he has stolen the ring, and despite searching for it, she never ends up finding it. Like Ainsley, the ring is another symbol of her innocence, with both of these symbols being taken from her by the villain, forcing her to learn how to live without them.

This is directly contrasted to the necklace which Mira gifts Willa, that she steals from the mall to give to Willa, telling her that it reminded her of Willa because it so perfectly matches her ring. We see here how huge a part of Willa's identity this ring is that Mira wants to connect to her by giving her something to go along with it. This also emphasizes the complexity of Mira's character, because although she immorally obtains the necklace through theft, she is genuinely thinking of Willa and wanting to give her this piece of jewelry.

The other big character in the novel, Safiya, is meant to be another thought-provoking contrast to Mira, but in the other direction that Grayson is. Safiya is the one that Willa feels no pressure to be closer towards and thinks of her as more of a bad influence. We see her get drunk for the homecoming dance which Willa clearly judges her for, and she is very close with Grayson, but at the end of the day, she doesn't know Grayson's secret. She is a representation of everything that Willa could become as shown by the scene where her sister confronts Willa at homecoming and tells her that she's become a different person since she became friends with Mira and Grayson. Willa throughout the story changes herself to fit in with the group, showcasing how different she feels from herself at the beginning when she sees herself with her makeup done by Safiya and feels as though she is unrecognizable. However, rather than lose herself to her friends like Safiya did, she becomes a stronger and more self-assured person by the end of the novel. Safiya is also an interesting phenomenon because if Mira has convinced Grayson to spare her, that showcases even more what a deep betrayal it is that she didn't fight as hard for Willa.

Each character and their relationship to one another are important pieces to the puzzle of this novel that help showcase my coming-of-age themes through loss of innocence and exploration of sexuality and relationships. Every piece of this story has been carefully crafted to fully flesh out these characters into living beings that are relatable, real, and raw. The first forty pages of this novel that will be the consistence of this creative thesis set the tone for what happens next, and I hope that they leave you wanting more.

Creative Thesis

*The Vulture*

The heat of August in Bloomington, Minnesota beat down on me. The red glow of the sun was bright through my closed eyelids. The grass around me tickled my skin, but I lay still, feeling the warm air around me. It was my last day of freedom before I started high school. I wanted to soak up every last bit of summer the Earth had to offer, and I didn't move from my spot in the grass for several more moments. I reminisced on the previous months, trying to remember each moment and burn them all into my brain, clutching at them tightly and never letting them go. Summer was my oasis, the wonderful few months where I was free from my miserable life at school. Especially this summer, knowing that middle school was behind me, and I never had to go back or see any of my former classmates again.

When I finally sat up, I curled my knees to my chest, giving myself a small hug. I could tell that I had let my chest get a little too sunkissed, and I pulled up my top a little, hoping my mom wouldn't notice. I peered into the windows from my back porch, watching her cook dinner in the kitchen, unaware I was watching. She had her bleached blonde hair pulled back into a neat bun and was wearing her apron with my painted handprints on it. I could see her mouth moving, singing along to a song I couldn't hear. Pulling myself away from the refuge of my backyard, I came inside and wrapped my arms around her.

"Don't make me go to school tomorrow, momma," I said, my voice muffled as I buried my face into her. She rubbed my back absentmindedly, then leaned down to give me a quick kiss on the forehead.

"Oh, Willa, you're going to start this on your very first day?" she woefully sighed, the corners of her mouth tugging up into a teasing smile.

"Well, you know I had to try," I told her, leaning back and smiling. For three years, August to May, I said this to her each night. She tousled my hair, and I went to sit at the breakfast table, watching her as she finished making dinner. The golden bright sunlight shone through the kitchen, making my mom's hair gleam, turning it a shiny copper color. It was the best part of the day, I thought, when the sun made its way to golden hour, hitting the windows just right so that the kitchen was illuminated with yellow light. I knew she was making pasta. It was my comfort food, and my mom always made it if she knew that I was nervous about something. The rich

smell of the garlic and onion sauteed in olive oil filled the room and below the sound of my mom's radio, I could faintly hear the water bubbling.

Once I set the table and my mom made our plates, we ate in silence. I could tell she was deep in thought, and I didn't want to disturb her. She'd been that way more often, lately, sort of in her own little world. I knew that it was hard on her when my dad worked a lot, so I was trying to give her some grace. My mom got terrible, debilitating migraines, from stress, smells, virtually everything. Whenever she got quiet, I didn't want to add to her stress and bring one on. Sometimes, during these moments, I wondered what she thought about. Watching her eat her food slowly, taking small, delicate bites, I tried to imagine myself with an always-working husband and a teenage daughter, picturing the little worry crease between my brows that my mom carried between hers. Did she worry about me? In a strange sense that I couldn't quite explain, even to myself, I hoped that she did. The alternative was that she worried so much about other things that she rarely thought of me at all.

Instead of talking, I tried to plan my outfit for the next day, how I was going to introduce myself to people, and all the other awful preparations to be made before school. The two sides of my brain flipped back and forth, one wanting to wake up at 4 a.m. so I could curl my hair and do makeup, the other trying to remind me that if I was the only one all dressed up it would just be mortifying.

That night, lying in bed, I tried to force myself to sleep, but my thoughts were racing, and my heart pumped so loudly I could feel it in my ears. *What if nobody liked me?* I was awkward and shy. All through middle school, I had been bullied by the other kids. It was the kind of bullying to be passed off as teasing, where they all feigned being nice enough that the teachers thought I was in on the jokes, but I knew they were being mean when they'd laugh just a beat too long. They taunted me for my weight, my love for cartoons, really anything they could. Since I could talk, I felt like I never got along with people my age. My mom was the person in my life that I spent the most time with. I didn't want her to worry about me, but I knew that she did. I would try to be friendly and social and normal. I turned over in my bed, staring at my bedroom door, trying to see if I could hear my mom still out in the kitchen. I knew she was waiting to see



if my dad would call her on his break, but, by the time I heard her footsteps as she made her way to bed, I had not heard her lowered voice or the phone ring. I lay awake a little longer, fretting nervously to myself until I finally drifted off into uneasy sleep.

The morning of my first day, I got ready in silence. I had decided on a happy middle-- jeans and a cute-ish top, doing my makeup, but leaving my hair in a ponytail. At least I could say I was half pretty. My mom had already left for work by the time I was leaving, and my dad was fast asleep after working his night shift, so the house was quiet. I cracked open the door to check on him before I left, being careful not to make a sound. He was snoring ever so slightly with his back turned to me. Gently shutting his door, I shouldered my backpack to one side, leaving the house and closing the door quietly so as not to wake him.

I had to ride my bike to school in the mornings, as my parents didn't want me taking the bus. I had begged, pleaded, and done all matters short of a total breakdown, but as this was my first time attending public school, they were nervous enough without my riding the bus. I was only fourteen, still two long years away from getting a driver's license. It was absolutely humiliating to show up to class with helmet hair, covered in sweat, but I begrudgingly donned my helmet, starting my ride to school. I had done it every day for my three hell-ish years of middle school, and I would continue the tragic tradition for my freshman year. It wasn't too far-- maybe fifteen minutes-- but it was enough in the August heat to make me feel absolutely disgusting.

Once I arrived, I locked my bike to the bike rack in the front of the school, staring up at the looming sign that read: "Eden Prairie Senior High School". It looked enormous compared to the tiny middle school I'd been attending just last year. I missed my best friend, Ainsley, terribly, who had ended up going to a private school, abandoning me to this torture alone. My one friend in this world, she and I had hung out every week from the third day of sixth grade to the end of eighth. All through middle school, through braces and bangs, she had stuck with me. As hard as it was to be the outcast, it was made just a bit easier to have her on my side. And although I felt like there was an Ainsley-shaped hole in my heart walking in the front doors, I tried to convince

myself that things weren't going to change between us. I twisted the ring she had given me, my nervous habit. I felt slightly soothed, looking down at the tiny, gold ring with my birthstone molded into a heart, matching her ring. The birthstone rings were her present to me when we graduated eighth grade. Mine held a small diamond, hers held a pearl. I twisted it one more time for good luck, then walked to my first class, trying to hold my head up high.

I spent the morning hoping no one could smell the sweat on me and continuously smoothing down my helmet hair, trying to listen to each teacher while simultaneously looking like I didn't care too much. The first day meant icebreakers and meeting the other freshmen with wide, scared eyes like mine. I introduced myself about a billion times, otherwise keeping quiet. I ate lunch with a girl from my art class named Mira, who thankfully did most of the talking and let me eat my lunch in silence. The day started to blur together quickly. The final bell jolted me back to my senses as I began to close my eyes in my final class, where my desk was so comfortably warm. Eden Prairie was huge compared to my small middle school, and by the time I was leaving, I had come to the joyful realization that I could get through my high school career without anyone discovering that I even existed.

My bike ride home was quiet too, though I pedaled faster in hopes that no school buses saw me. I ate dinner with my mom in the evening. I did my first day's homework-- seriously, homework on the first day? I went to bed. I got back up in the morning and continued the routine that I assumed would be my next four years. Repeat. Repeat.

August faded into September, and the heat died down. The beginning of fall crept into my life as the leaves turned red. The bike ride to school had actually become quite pleasant, though I'd never admit it to my parents, and I now knew all of my classes like the back of my hand. As I left another summer behind, I felt a deep nostalgia for days spent at the pool with Ainsley, playing mermaids and tanning. But a new era of my life had begun to take place as I grew roots into my unprecedented life as a high schooler.

Mira from art class had quickly grown into a friend, and we spent every lunch period together. In art class, we watched movies together on her phone while we painted, sharing

earbuds. It was one of those friendships where we clicked right away, and I prayed she would never notice how much cooler she was than me. You might even say that I worshiped her. She was naturally and effortlessly sleek in a manner that I could never achieve. She had a slim, pale face curtained by her black hair which was always styled straight down her back, effortlessly long and thick. Her eyes were almond-shaped and warm brown, and they crinkled around the corners when she smiled. Mira always wore the cutest clothes, and everyone around her naturally seemed to be entranced by her. Deep, deep down, the most disgusting and vile part of me resented her glowing nature, but she was even unhateable in her grace, so naturally I loved her.

Our days at school passed with little to note on. My mom asked for any sort of gossip or stories from me when I got home from school, but each night I reassured her that the routine of my recent life was overall uninteresting. Until I met Grayson.

Mira's birthday was rapidly approaching, meaning that lunch and art class had now turned into party planning time. Typically, we didn't talk much during art, as Mira actually loved to paint. I enjoyed art too, but it was the one thing Mira took more seriously than I did. She was talented and had one project in particular that she'd been working on since the first day of school. It was a painting you would never expect from a girl like Mira: sleek, stunning, and maybe a little shallow-- not that I would say that to her face. The painting was an intricately detailed artwork of a monster. It was close up to the monster's face, which was distorted into a snarl, and it was beautifully terrifying. The monster had sunken, black eyes and a pale complexion. Its wrinkly skin appeared to be clinging onto its skull loosely, as if the creature was falling apart. It had a long, arching nose which sharpened into a point, and its entire face protruded grossly in an almost bird-like sense. The monster was mostly a bald creature, with only a few thin, black hairs sticking out of its head. Her brushwork was stunning, and it was an impressively realistic piece, but the monster itself gave me nightmares.

However, the hideous painting had retired to the drying rack for the last few art periods, and instead she absentmindedly doodled in her notebook, pretending to work while she chattered away to me about her party. She had decided we would do dinner and a sleepover, the ultimate

classy fifteenth birthday party (according to Mira, at least-- I had not had a birthday party since I was eight. Ainsley had held a birthday party in seventh grade, and even I had teased her, telling her that we were too old to have birthday parties by then. She had agreed with me afterwards, when nobody else showed up). I loved dressing up as much as the next girl, but Mira was next level. After several days of nonstop planning for her outfit alone, I found myself missing watching movies and painting in peace. I almost even missed her monster painting.

The night that her party finally arrived, I was surprisingly nervous. Her two best friends went to another school, so I had never met them before. One of them was a boy, which also frightened me, although I would never admit that to Mira. I had never been friends with a boy (come to think of it, I had probably never even spoken to a boy my age). Curiosity gripped me as I wondered if she liked him. Ainsley obviously had never had a boy look her way either, and I tried to imagine how I'd feel if she had. Would it give me the same strange feeling in my gut that it did with Mira?

I also knew that Mira would insist we would take photos, so I holed myself up in the bathroom in a desperate pursuit of making myself beautiful. I carefully attempted applying my lipstick-- though I still had never really figured out how much I was actually supposed to be overlining my lips. I took a step back once I finished it all, giving myself a once over. My skin's summer tan had faded, leaving my cheeks pale and colorless. I still thought I looked pretty enough, if you ignored that and the baby fat that I unfortunately stored in my cheeks. I had slicked my long, brown hair back into a claw-clip and donned a little, pink corset top and jeans, leaving my golden ring for last. My mom let me borrow her pink handbag, which I sorely coveted and took anytime she gave me the chance.

"You look gorgeous, sweetie," she said, giving me a quick squeeze.

"Thanks, momma." I squeezed back, trying to send her my love and gratitude through the embrace. The sound of Mira's parents honking their car horn pulled me away, and I blew her a kiss as I raced to the door. Mira's car was parked ever so slightly with the wheels on our grass, which made me wince because I knew it would leave a mud spot and make my mom mad. I glanced back at my house, reassured that my bike was safely hidden from view around the corner

of the driveway. I climbed into the backseat, where Mira awaited me in a tight, short, white dress and a silver tiara. My initial reaction was annoyance, as it seemed like a very simple outfit considering all of the hard work we went to planning it, but I couldn't stay mad at her. She looked beautiful.

"Happy birthday!" I squealed, giving her a hug. She smelled as good as she looked, and I felt a tiny pang of jealousy that I wasn't allowed to wear any sort of perfume to spare my mom from migraines. I also felt guilty as soon as this thought crossed my mind. It really wasn't my mom's fault.

"Aah, thank you!" She shrieked back. "Mom and daddy, this is Willa Carter." Her parents both chimed in introductions to me. Mira turned back to me as they drove off.

"Okay, so I decided I wanted to keep it small, you know, nothing too crazy or anything, so I just invited Safiya and Grayson. Obviously they don't go to Eden Prairie, but Grayson is one of my best friends, and I've known Safiya my entire life."

"Yeah, yeah," I chimed in when appropriate, unconsciously twirling my ring. Most of these reminders were facts she had already told me twenty times over the span of art classes, but I did not dare interrupt her. She continued,

"... And Safiya's twin sister goes to school with us, but *don't* ask Safiya about her, they hate each other."

"Who?" Mira finally piqued my curiosity, as this was not something she had mentioned to me before. Mira looked at me in clear annoyance, saying,

"We are *not* talking about her twin, remember?"

"Right, right," I said, unable to keep myself from rolling my eyes ever so slightly, retreating back into my silent state as she continued to happily chatter away.

Once we arrived at the restaurant, we went ahead and picked our table, waiting for her friends. I instantly knew when they arrived. Two teenagers walked in, scanning the room looking for us. Safiya had dark and perfectly clear skin, wearing her hair in long, pretty box braids. She wore tall, high heeled shoes that I probably would have toppled over in. Her face was striking, but unfamiliar to me, and as I internally scanned my classmates in my head, I knew that I had not

seen her twin before. And then, of course, there was Grayson. He was tall, towering over Safiya by at least a head even with her heels. He wore a simple sweater and jeans, but the sweater was a little too tight around his chest. They both looked perfect, a little annoyingly perfect I thought. In my head, I went back and forth on whether I was the charity case of our little dinner attendees, or if just the mere fact of me being there implied that I had to be-- at least *somewhat*-- conventionally attractive.

When they came over, Mira stood up to hug them both, introducing me despite the preparation speech she had given me about the two of them in the car. I watched her squeeze Safiya, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. Her hug with Grayson was much shorter, and she pulled away quickly as if it had burned. I almost thought I imagined her shudder behind her bright smile. Safiya gave me a quick hug, but Grayson held on to me for just a second too long. I stepped back from him a little nervously, examining him up close. Being directly in front of him, I started to backpedal on my initial impression of him. He was cute, mostly, but now that he was standing only a few inches from me, I started to notice that all of his features fit just wrong on his face, as if he was a puzzle that hadn't been put together right. He had a sexy Roman nose, though it didn't fit the rest of his softer features. His nose was pierced, and the ring was also slightly too big for his face. His dark hair was a little too long, his curls falling awkwardly across his forehead. His lips were full and pink, not very boy-ish. His eyes, most of all, frightened me. He had thick eyelashes, and I imagined when they were closed he looked quite pretty. But his eyes were so dark they were almost black, looking stormy and sullen, as if he had just witnessed something terrible.

"Nice to meet you," I said timidly.

"Nice to meet you too, Willa," he said. His voice was deep, and I was surprised by how raspy it sounded, almost as if he was a smoker.

The six of us sat around the table, Grayson sitting down next to me and Safiya next to Mira. Unease rose to the back of my throat like vomit as Mira instantly turned to start whispering something to her, leaving me virtually alone with Grayson. There was an awkward silence between us as the girls talked and Mira's parents spoke, the table splitting into duos.

“So... how long have you known Mira?” I asked him in an attempt to break our silence.

“I met her when I was a freshman in high school,” he answered casually. “She went to the middle school nearby, so we rode on the same bus. I guess we just kind of became friends right away.”

“And you all have been... just friends?” I trailed off slightly, trying to find the right words to ask the question that was really none of my business. I forced myself to sound nonchalant, but found it hard to meet those dark eyes.

“Definitely just friends. I don’t really think I’m her type,” he responded casually, smirking slightly as if this reminded him of an inside joke. I looked across the table at Mira, wondering if that was true. She really was out of his league. Mira was laughing at something Safiya had said as we watched her, her full lips parting into a wide smile.

“And, I mean, she’s not really mine either,” Grayson added, pulling my eyes away from her and towards him.

“What is your type?” I asked, trying to gauge if this was the response he was attempting to pry from me. My cheeks reddened slightly as I realized he might have thought this was my attempt at flirting.

“Oh, I don’t know. I haven’t dated too many girls,” he said as if genuinely weighing it over.

“Daddy!” Mira said suddenly, making us turn our heads. “Can we get drinks for the table? Since it’s my birthday and all.”

“Your *fifteenth* birthday, young lady,” he teasingly scolded.

“As if you didn’t drink on your fifteenth birthday,” her mom retorted, playfully smacking him on the arm, evoking giggles from Mira and Safiya. She waved over the waiter, asking for drinks for the table and slyly handing him a folded wad of cash, the amount of which I couldn’t make out.

“Oh, um, I don’t really drink alcohol,” I said nervously. I suddenly felt very out of my depth. The only drink I’d ever had was a sip of my mom’s wine once. I wouldn’t even be fifteen until the spring, and it had never occurred to me that we might be drinking at this party.

“Really?” Safiya cried out, sounding absolutely appalled. It was pretty much the first time she had actually spoken to me that night. Grayson leaned down and whispered,

“I’ll take yours if you don’t want it.” I looked at him, slightly taken aback, and he gave me a subtle wink.

“I’m almost eighteen, you know. In other countries, it’d be no big deal,” he assured me. I gaped a little at this reveal, not having understood that he was so much older than us. Mira had only been in sixth grade when they’d met, I realized. I hadn’t thought that he even looked that much older, except maybe for his height and his eyes. The waiter brought everyone their drinks, and as promised, Grayson had mine, which I quietly thanked him for. We sang happy birthday to Mira and afterwards piled into her parents’ van, Safiya and Grayson begging us for a ride as they had taken an Uber to the restaurant. My initial anxiety turned to amusement as I watched Mira and Safiya make fools out of themselves, acting completely drunk after one drink. We were all laughing so hard in the backseat that I caught myself in the moment wondering, *when was the last time I had laughed like this?* When we got back to her house, we made her parents take pictures. I had brought along my polaroid in my mom’s little purse, and we all squeezed onto their sofa for it. When the polaroid developed, I was met with a photo of Mira on Safiya’s lap and me on Grayson’s-- which I had been so mortified to do I thought I might drop dead-- with all of our wide smiles. The girls had insisted I sit on his lap, and I’d been terrified that he would think I was too heavy sitting on him. Even in the washed out polaroid, my cheeks were noticeably scarlet. We looked cute, though, like a real little friend group. I didn’t know it at the time, but I would eventually go on to place it in my clear phone case, replacing the polaroid currently pressed against the back of my phone: a photo of Ainsley and me in her basement.

Towards the end of the night, we had settled in Mira’s room, all sprawled onto an air mattress on the floor. Mira and Safiya had fallen asleep, their breathing and the gentle sounds of the tv the only noise in the room. Mira slept with her mouth slightly open, letting out a small sigh as her chest moved up and down. She twitched every now and then, muttering something incoherent, and I wondered what she was thinking. I finally tore my eyes away from her and looked at Grayson in the dark with only the tv light illuminating his face. In the dark, I was



surprised to find that I thought he looked stunning. His features appeared softer, his eyes not so menacing with nothing to contrast them to. I shyly admired him until he caught my eyes, then flushed and turned back to the tv. I could feel his eyes still on me, knowing that he was trying to think of something to say.

“You’re so pretty, Willa,” he whispered finally, catching me completely off guard. This was definitely not the sentence I’d expected him to land on.

“What?” I laughed incredulously, sure I had misheard him.

“You’re really pretty,” he repeated.

“I’m only fourteen, you know,” I told him, my laughter gone. “You’d probably think a girl your age is prettier.”

“You look old for your age,” he said, smiling. I blushed, conflicted between enjoying this compliment and feeling slightly disturbed by it deep down in my gut.

“You know,” he continued, “I like this right now. Just the two of us.” We both looked over at the girls, deeply asleep.

“Much quieter,” I whispered, smiling in spite of myself when he laughed.

Eventually I dozed off, the four of us waking up the next morning all squished together on the mattress. My mom came to pick me up, and I talked her ear off the entire way home in the car, something I didn’t typically do. I had never been much of a talker; that had always been my mom. I left out the drinking, knowing that might displease her, though I felt a small pit of guilt in my stomach about it. I had never lied to my mom about anything before. I tried to reassure myself that it was no big deal, ignoring my conscience in the back of my head. *It’s not technically a lie, just not exactly the whole truth.*

“Well, it sounds like you had a great time,” she said when we got home, smiling at me and leaning over to tousle my hair. “I’m so glad that you’ve made some new friends.” My mom said this with such obvious relief that I realized she had probably been worrying as much as I had. This simultaneously made me feel sad for her, but also slightly resentful. Did even my own mom find me to be a complete outcast? I moved to get out of the car, trying to mask the slight hurt on my face, but gasped when a huge bird landed on the windshield of my mom’s car,

eliciting a scream from us both. We exchanged looks, laughing at ourselves. My mom smacked the windshield.

“Shoo!” She yelled, and the bird took off. It had looked like a vulture, which wasn’t completely uncommon for Minnesota, but never in my life had I seen one land on someone’s car.

“That was weird,” I said to my mom, and I could tell from her face that she thought the same. She gave me a quick, reassuring smile, trying to disguise her unease, saying to me after a kiss on the forehead,

“I’m sure they do that all the time. C’mon, you need to get inside and take a shower. You smell like perfume, and you’re giving me a migraine.”

The night before, I had exchanged phone numbers with Safiya and Grayson. But I was surprised when Grayson texted me later that morning as I sat at the kitchen table, trying my hardest to figure out my Algebra 1 homework, which I had irresponsibly neglected due to my hyper-focus on the party.

*hey :)*

*hi*, I responded back, maybe too quickly.

*wyd?* He said back, and when I answered with “homework”, he sent back a gif of someone jumping off of a cliff. I laughed to myself a little. My phone dinged again, another message from Grayson:

*i had a good time at mira’s party.*

*me too*, I texted back. I set my phone screen down on the table, trying to concentrate back on my homework, but now I felt out of focus. I couldn’t decide if I was happy he’d texted, or slightly agitated. He had been nice at Mira’s party, but also off putting. I wasn’t sure it was such a good idea to get close to him. I thought he was an odd friend for Mira to have, and it was hard to imagine them as childhood friends. But, then again, Mira was such an outgoing and agreeable person, she probably could make fast friends with any serial killer or oddball. After all, she had made friends with me.

As the school year hurtled along at an alarmingly fast pace, I found myself seeing Grayson more often, along with Mira and Safiya. By October, we were hanging out every weekend. Fall was in full swing, the entire town having turned red and orange from the trees. Everyone was beginning to set up Halloween decorations, and while I admired them, my heart ached. This month, I felt, was the official end of summer. Of course, summer ended when school started, but now golden hour came too soon in the evening, slipping past me as I did homework hunched over the kitchen island. The time for sunbathing in the yard and my mom's cooking was gone, a new era arising in its place. My mom and dad had thrown themselves into their work, spending most of their time holed up in their offices. This was typical for my dad, but weird for my mom. She experienced more migraines, spending days in a row in bed with the lights off. I started making dinner for myself, giving up on coaxing her out of her office on the days that she was not bedridden. Mira, who had gotten her driver's permit after her birthday, had begun driving me to school each morning, which was one change in my life that I was deeply thankful for. My bike sat forgotten in the garage, collecting dust.

I spent most weekends at Mira's house. Back in middle school, Ainsley had always slept over at my house because her parents constantly fought, and it had always somewhat irritated me. My mom wasn't one to hover, but she always found excuses to come check on us, asking Ainsley inappropriate questions. I thought that, deep down, it made my mom very happy to hear that her marriage was more stable than Ainsley's parents. However, Mira's parents left us in peace, never bothering us more than a quick "hello". Their house was large and lavish, and Mira's bedroom was any girl's dream. She had a fluffy canopy bed in the middle of the room adorned with pink pillows. In the corner of the room was a vanity filled to the brim with makeup, skincare, and condoms, which I did not believe Mira used for a second, but we all knew she loved us to think that she did. It was the perfect get-away from my painfully regular life. When I came back home Sunday evenings to prepare for another day of school, I tried to remember how I could have seen our kitchen and tiny backyard in such a beautiful light-- they seemed so dim and cramped now.

One of the first weekends I spent at her house, I hesitantly brought up Safiya and Grayson, trying to see how much Mira would talk about them behind their backs with morbid curiosity. I lay on my stomach on the large canopy bed, watching her paint her nails as she sat at her vanity. She swiveled the chair around to look at me, and I would watch, transfixed, as her full lips parted into a perfect O to blow on her drying polish.

“Okay, you have to tell me the truth,” I started, swinging my feet from side to side. “Do Safiya and Grayson like each other?” It was something I often wondered from the way that they spoke to each other and their constant touching.

“No, not really,” Mira said without thinking. “They’ve always been, like, grossly annoying with each other. But Safiya definitely doesn’t like him, and Grayson likes you.” Her head jolted up when she realized what she’d just said, and I instantly turned my body and sat up on the bed.

“WHAT?” I shrieked.

“Oh my god, *please* do not tell Grayson I told you that. He would be so mad,” Mira begged, looking slightly horrified.

“You’re not serious,” I said, staring at her with my jaw gaping open as if I were a fish. My insides were starting to knot up inside me in a way that I had never really felt before. Was she serious? No guy had ever liked me before. Not weird, awkward Willa. Why would an older guy like me? Why would Grayson like me? My brain was spinning.

“I’m serious! But you cannot tell him. He’s been planning on asking you to homecoming at their school, but he had this whole big thing planned. He’d never forgive me,” Mira seemed genuinely distressed, so I swore I’d never tell him. But I still felt like I’d gone into shock.

“What should I do?” I asked her incredulously. My heart was starting to beat all out of order in my chest. Why was this freaking me out so badly?

“Well,” she drew the word out, as if she was giving herself time to formulate her question. “Do you like him?”

Did I like him? He kind of terrified me, if I was being honest. Something about him didn't fit right in my life. Maybe he was attractive. We would have a cute height difference. He made me laugh. I stood there, reeling. He *liked* me. He liked *me*.

This newfound knowledge changed our friendship, maybe not on his unaware end, but definitely on mine. As fall continued on, Mira tried to coax me into loving the autumnal season. When I slept over with her, we would watch Halloween movies and make pumpkin spice cookies. Our friend group all had to tolerate her love for the season and in everything we did, I studied Grayson, trying to gauge how I felt about him. We went to haunted houses, and I hated them. I knew Grayson could tell because he always walked in front of me, holding his arm out just slightly as if shielding me from whatever came up next. I would catch Mira and Safiya giggling, and finally I begged them not to make me go anymore, feeling strangely embarrassed.

Although I spent a good deal of time wrapping my head around Grayson, it was also hard to tear my thoughts away from Mira. In her continued endeavor to force me to love fall as much as she did, she bought us matching pajamas. One morning we helped her parents set up all of the Halloween decor in the front yard, and I tried to remember the last time I'd done that with my parents, but strangely, I couldn't. Although I typically resented fall for its marking the end of the summer-- it was hard to hate anything Mira loved so much. Her joy was infectious.

Our friend group often ended up going to brunch and shopping on Saturdays. After spending the night with Mira on Friday, she would do my makeup and give me an outfit to borrow, then drive us wherever we wanted to go. One particularly cold Saturday morning in late October, my mom had insisted I stay home the previous night, lecturing me that I was never home anymore. My mom and I had never fought before, and I found myself extremely irritated by it.

"I've never even met these friends before, Willa," she whined to me the night before. "You could always have Mira stay at our house for a change."

"Oh my gosh, Mom," I had huffed, dramatically storming into my room. She tentatively followed me, hovering outside my door. We didn't really know how to have a fight, and we

stood, watching each other, nervously awaiting what happened next. I looked at her face, her coffee-colored eyes wide with concern and her brow furrowed anxiously. Her chubby, heart-shaped face resembled mine so strongly with its upset expression that I was momentarily stunned, and I wondered if she was looking at me and thinking the same thing.

“Honey, I just worry about you. You used to never go out, and now, I feel like we never see you. You don’t talk to me about what you’re doing anymore, and I used to know the people in your life.”

“The people in my life were just Ainsley,” I bit back, fresh anger rising to the surface. “I never used to go out because I didn’t have any friends, and now that I’m actually happy and having fun, you can’t stand it. Don’t act like for one second that you miss me; all you do is work and rot in bed. You’re the reason we never talk, not me.” That was the truth, the words that my family had been so carefully avoiding speaking. As soon as they left my mouth, I wished I could take them back--- My mom stood frozen in front of me, and for several long moments, I wondered if things could ever be the same between us now.

“You’re staying home,” she said, her mouth set in a firm line. “That’s final.”

And so I had stayed home, texting my friends that night complaining that I was a prisoner in my own home. As upset and angry as I was that night, the next morning I woke up to find a note on the kitchen counter in my mom’s handwriting. She’d written she was sorry, she loved me, and I could go see my friends today if I wanted. I felt a little less resentful of her now, having slept. I got myself ready for the day, convincing myself that my mom had forgiven me and I had forgiven her, but I still crumpled up the note she left me.

Mira promised to come pick me up, and I went out to my front yard early, dreading the sight ahead. The yard was swarmed with vultures-- an issue that had been plaguing us since the day I’d come home from Mira’s fifteenth birthday party, and my mom had shoo-ed away the vulture from her car. We got more and more of them over the weeks, something which I was more embarrassed by than anything. It was another reason I didn’t really want people coming to our house, though if I’d tried to explain this to my mom, she would’ve insisted that it wasn’t our fault. She’d been distant enough recently that I thought there was a chance she didn’t understand

just how creepy our vulture infestation really was. I often wondered if it was because our house smelled, and we were just too used to it to notice. Silly little me, as always, only cared what everyone else thought. I went through the humiliating task of running back and forth across the yard, shrieking and waving my arms until they'd all flown off. When Mira finally pulled into my driveway, you would never know the yard had been chock full of vultures just minutes before.

Mira drove with the windows down, the cold air whipping my face and hair, keeping me present in the moment. I queued "Style" by Taylor Swift, slightly embarrassed at first because it was one of Ainsley's favorites and was maybe a little outdated, but Mira went along with it, singing along and taking a hand off the wheel every now and then to dance. Never before had I been friends with someone who could drive, and the blood pumped through my veins, bringing me to life as I stuck my hand out the window and felt the world rush by. I looked over at her long, dark hair whipping around her face, trying to freeze this moment in my head forever.

She sang, "I've heard, oh, that you've been out and about with some other girl, some other girl," feigning hurt, and looking over at me as if I was the man she was singing to. I laughed a little, humoring her and singing back,

"What you heard is true, but I can't stop thinking 'bout you and I." We sang the chorus together, shrieking over the wind, and I knew this song would never make me think of Ainsley again. I never wanted this moment to end, but, to my disappointment, all things must. Eventually Mira pulled into the parking lot and turned off the car, abruptly ending the music and my feelings with it. I drew my hand back in, only realizing how cold I felt when the car stopped.

At brunch, I huddled against Mira in our booth, wishing I had not forgotten a sweater. Safiya, of course, had already claimed Grayson's, and each time she made hand motions while she spoke, her hands were covered by the long sleeves. I watched the sweater hang off of her, trying to imagine myself wearing it instead. For some reason, I couldn't quite picture it. Our booth was in the back corner, and we requested it as often as we could because we enjoyed being away from the rest of the restaurant. Nestled against the wall, the little booth received a soft aura of light from the big glass windows, basking Safiya and Grayson across from us, making their

skin look golden and shimmery. Safiya's brown eyes caught the light brilliantly, glimmering as she spoke, but Grayson's appeared to deflect it, his eyes as black as ever.

Mira and Safiya each requested their own check, as their parents often gave them money for these outings. Grayson told the waiter to put our checks together. The only one of us with a job, he always had his own money, and he often paid for me despite my protests. We ordered our food, watching the waiter walk away, then turned back to each other, continuing our conversation. Safiya was discussing what kind of dress she wanted to wear to homecoming later that month, which was just about the biggest event in the universe to my two new friends. I listened happily, leaning my head on Mira's shoulder. She platonically kissed me on the forehead, then leaned her head against mine, interrupting Safiya to tell her, *No, if you wear a yellow dress, I will literally not go with you.* Mira was unlike any friend I'd had in the past, not awkward or weird. She was one of those friends that, looking back, I could hardly remember how we'd even begun talking, or what we'd started talking about, just that I could now talk to her about anything and everything. I felt so grateful for her that morning, smelling her vanilla scented perfume. I was thankful for Safiya and Grayson too, and I sat back up straight to look more closely at them, smiling to myself. I thought back to that first day of school, how terrified I had been. It felt like such a silly thought now, to have fretted over a new school, making friends, and my first-day outfit. My phone buzzed suddenly in my pocket, and I pulled it out, expecting it to be from my mom. My heart dropped when I saw the sender. Ainsley. Oh Ainsley. My best friend from middle school, the sweetest girl I ever met. The text almost felt like a punch, the weight of my guilt momentarily reeling me to a halt.

*hey willa! i miss you! wanna hang out sometime?*

The two of us had hardly spoken since we started high school. The first couple weeks we Facetimed a few evenings, but as the school year hurtled on, I was slower to respond to her, more eager to talk to Safiya, Mira, and Grayson. Now, we hadn't spoken at all in several weeks. I still loved her and everything-- I reassured myself--, but it was as if she had frozen in her sixth grade state. She still wanted to watch our old favorite youtubers and read the old, embarrassing stories we would write together. She still wore jean shorts that hung to her knees and had a unibrow that



she refused to shave or wax because she thought her mom wouldn't like it. Those things didn't matter so much to me at age twelve, but now I was almost fifteen.

"Willa!" Mira jolted me back to reality.

"Sorry, let me respond to this really quickly," I said. I quickly typed back to Ainsley, *yes! i'd love to, i'm just super busy right now. let me look at my schedule and i'll get back to you asap :)*

I put my phone down on the table so I couldn't see her reply.

"Oh my god, Willa, you're getting too busy for us, aren't you! Your phone's blowing up from all your other friends!" Safiya dramatically cried, teasingly putting a hand to her forehead as if shocked. Everyone laughed a little bit.

"You guys would be shocked if you knew how many people tried to hang out with me. You're basically in the presence of a celebrity," I sarcastically replied. Mira laughed so hard at this that she was leaning into me for support, but I found myself looking at Grayson. He laughed a little, but it didn't quite reach those dark eyes. They bore into me, and, when I was no longer able to stand it, I looked down at the table.

"We're so lucky you made the time in your schedule for this brunch," Grayson said jokingly, but not as jokingly as Safiya had been. His voice changed ever so slightly, deeper and raspier. The table went awkwardly silent for a moment, and I internally thanked Safiya when she changed the subject back to homecoming. I shoved down my guilt and put my phone back into my pocket.

We went shopping afterwards and briefly split up, Mira and I looking through Forever 21 as Safiya and Grayson went the opposite way from us, walking elbow in elbow. I watched them go, wondering if Grayson ever imagined my arm instead of hers. When Mira and I walked out of the store, surprisingly empty-handed, she dragged me a safe distance away, then gave me an evil little smirk.

"Surpriseeee," She sang, drawing out the word as she pulled a thin, golden necklace with the tag still on it out of her pocket.

“Mira!” I gasped. “Oh my god, did you steal that?” I looked around quickly, hushing my voice.

”Willa, I knew you were going to act like that!” She half-whispered, giggling as she handed it to me. As quickly as her playful attitude had come, it went, and she dropped her voice too. “I want you to have this. I saw it, and I thought that it would match your ring so beautifully. It’s perfect for you.”

I froze momentarily, running this over in my head. That was a crime. That was something that you probably could go to jail for, and I would be considered an accomplice. But, on the other hand, she had gotten it for me. She was thinking of me, and yes, stealing was wrong, but in her head this was a very thoughtful gesture. How could I be mad that she had wanted to steal it for me? She nonchalantly pulled the tag off.

”Want me to put it on you?” She asked me. I stared at her, my mind completely blank. Had I ever told her “no” before?

”Yes,” I responded back finally, feeling guilt tying my stomach up into terrible knots, but trying to will it away as Mira smiled. She came behind me, her fingers brushing the back of my neck as she latched it in place.

My head felt like it was going to explode, but I didn’t have time to process any of these feelings because Safiya and Grayson were walking back towards us. The two of them clearly did not notice that anything had happened, so as the rest of the group chattered away, I tried to distract myself. I knew I was being quiet, and Grayson noticed immediately, lightly touching my shoulder.

”You okay, Willa?” He asked me.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m good,” I responded, looking up at him and giving him a bright smile.

“Hey, you guys go ahead, we’ll catch up in a minute,” Grayson told Safiya and Mira. Mira looked at me with an emotion I couldn’t quite understand, and this frightened me. But Safiya, blissfully unaware, grabbed Mira by the elbow and dragged her away from us. Grayson, grabbing mine, gently steered me to one of the mall fountains, sitting us down on a nearby bench. We sat watching the fountain and the water gently ripple. The mall bustled with noise and

the clicking of shoes, but it all seemed to quiet down for a moment as I watched the gushing fountain, the movement of the water becoming the loudest sound in my head. Slowly, my heartbeat returned to a regular rate. I took one deep breath in, held it for a moment, then slowly let it out, keeping my gaze on the fountain. I looked at all of the loose change at the bottom of the water, remembering how I had come to the mall as a kid and begged my mom for a penny to wish on. There were people who came here to steal, like Mira, but there were other people that were willing to lose their money, willing to give it up for the sake of one wish. Did that mean she was a bad person? Even if she thought she was doing the right thing? I leaned my head onto Grayson without thinking about it, watching the water ripple and wondering what all of those people had wished for.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked me.

“Do you have any change?” I said back, sitting up. He looked at me kind of funny, but pulled a dime out of his pocket. “Want to make a wish?” I asked. Grayson closed his eyes, holding the coin for a moment, then placed it on the tip of his pointer finger and flicked it into the fountain. We both watched the water ripple around it, changing course around the small, silver coin. It sank to the bottom in slow motion, and my stomach dropped when it hit the bottom, echoing so loudly in my body that it could have been an explosion. I looked at Grayson frantically, but he looked so unnerved that I tried to shake off the feeling, dismissing the growing nervousness in my chest.

“What did you wish for?” I asked, keeping my voice surprisingly steady.

“I can’t tell you-- then it won’t come true,” Grayson said teasingly.

“Did you wish for me to go to homecoming with you?” I surprised myself with the question, not having expected to actually say it out loud. That inner conflict in me that was becoming ever so annoying rose again. Part of me was trying to make him mad. The other part of me was dying to see him admit it. I could see Grayson’s shock on his face, but he quickly covered it up, giving me a smile.

“Shit. I didn’t. Do you have another coin?” His response made me laugh, and I looked up into those dark, stormy eyes. This was the moment, the moment that I would later recount to

Safiya and Mira over and over as they begged for every detail, wailing and laughing. I pushed down my initial uneasiness, knowing that I could not disappoint my new friends.

“So, are we going together?” I asked once we had finished laughing.

“Yeah, I think we are,” he said. My cheeks flushed red, and I leaned back into him. His skin felt burning hot against mine, and I decided after a moment that I thought I enjoyed it. Together, we continued to watch the fountain until Safiya and Mira returned.

That night, I stayed at Mira’s house, and she squealed when I told her the day’s events. It was late at night, and we had already changed into our pajamas. We lay in her bed together, the only light in the room emitting from the little lamp on her nightstand. We lay on our sides, facing each other, and we had to keep shushing each other in reminder not to wake up her parents.

”This is so exciting! Aw, Willa, you’re going to have your first real boyfriend,” She cooed. I tried to imagine Grayson as my boyfriend. I tried to imagine even telling my mom that I had a boyfriend, and just this idea made me giggle.

“I don’t even know how to dance. We’re going to get to homecoming, and I’m going to step on his feet,” I said to her in an embarrassed whisper, figuring that maybe I should start stressing over the smaller issues first. Homecoming was at our school, but being allowed to bring students from other schools, Mira had agreed to take Safiya, and I’d agreed to bring Grayson, even before we made it officially a date. I tried to imagine Grayson in a tuxedo in my school auditorium, twirling me to some cheesy slow song.

“You’re not going to step on his feet,” she assured me. “It’ll be so cute because he’ll, like, show you how to dance. I bet he’ll kiss you too.”

”I’ve never kissed anyone,” I admitted to Mira. She rolled to her stomach, pushing herself up onto her elbows, her mouth dropped open.

“You’re lying!” She shrieked, and I had to shush her again. “Sorry, sorry,” Mira lowered her voice, still sounding perplexed. “You’ve never kissed anyone?” She asked me, her eyes wide.

”You make me sound like a nun,” I whined, burying my face in her pillow.

”No, no, no, it’s fine! We can fix this,” she said, and I looked at her, confused. Mira continued, asking me softly, “Do you want to practice?” I continued staring at her until her

question computed in my head. I looked around, as if someone might pop up and scold me. I didn't think this was allowed, but I found myself wanting to. Grayson had probably kissed tons of girls, and I didn't want him to think I was inexperienced.

"We can't tell anyone," I said to her quietly.

"Of course not," Mira assured me. "It won't even count as your first kiss." I thought about this, deciding that it really wouldn't count. The room was so dark that her face was only softly illuminated, the lamplight making her hair look lighter and silkier.

"Okay," I whispered, closing my eyes. I felt Mira lean in, slowly. I kept my body completely still, feeling her face closer and closer, her lips hovering an inch from mine. And then, softly, she closed the gap between us. I parted my lips, breathing her in without knowing what I was doing, feeling her lips against mine. My body felt as if I'd been electrocuted, every molecule lighting up, and I told myself that this was just the reaction anyone would have to the first pair of lips meeting theirs. It would feel that way when Grayson kissed me, and I tried to imagine her lips as his, fantasizing that the darkness of her bedroom was the darkness of the school auditorium. But Mira's lips were so feminine, so clearly her own. For one terrifying moment, we didn't stop, and she rolled over on top of me so she was straddling me, slipping her tongue into my mouth, and I felt like I might explode. But then it was over as quickly as it started. Mira pulled herself away from me, her breath hitching. It was silent for what felt like an eternity.

"Do you feel ready now?" She asked, trying to sound teasing and nonchalant.

"Was I good?" I answered her with another question. Mira clearly wrestled with this question, biting her lower lip. The animalistic, wild Willa that resided deep, deep under myself imagined me biting her lip and this thought was so intrusive and passionate that I felt slightly horrified by myself.

"Grayson will love you," she finally responded, and with that, we decided that it was time to sleep. It took me longer than usual to fall asleep in her bed, feeling acutely aware of her body next to mine. When I finally drifted off to sleep, it was a restless sleep, and I dreamt of things that I would try to convince myself I hadn't for the days to come.

The night of homecoming came too quickly, the night before Halloween. I did not feel even remotely ready, and I woke up that morning stress vomiting. I cried for my mom, my head in the toilet, feeling inexplicably alone and abandoned. But she did not come, still sleeping peacefully in her bed, having just recovered from another migraine. So I sat up alone, wiping my tears and brushing my teeth slowly.

Safiya, Mira, and I had agreed to get ready together, and then we would go to pick up Grayson. Grayson did not have a car, which I had discovered in previous weeks from Mira. Mira believed that he couldn't afford one, but it was not a topic we often discussed as it made me feel strangely guilty. It wasn't like I was anywhere near buying my own car.

After I finished brushing my teeth, I slowly crept to my parents' room, softly opening the door. They slept on opposite sides of the bed, their backs turned to each other. Their quiet breathing filled the room. Their curtains were drawn, but they were thin enough that patches of sunlight squeezed their way through, dancing softly along the edges of the hardwood floor. I watched them for a moment, feeling slightly like a deranged stalker, but mostly feeling sorrow. Even in their sleep, they both carried worry lines across their foreheads, and I noticeably thought that they looked older. It made me feel old too.

I turned and left their room, scrawling a quick note in the kitchen that I was leaving for Mira's for homecoming. I debated asking my mom if I could borrow my favorite pair of her heels, but decided it was not worth waking her. Instead, I called Mira, sighing when she hung up as I went to face the vultures alone before she arrived.

Three hours later, I was sitting on the edge of the bathtub in Mira's bathroom as she curled my hair, Safiya standing over us as she did her makeup. The two had arrived to pick me up together, and I found myself bitter that they had spent the night together without me. I tried to push this resentment down, determined to be a good sport, despite the nausea that had followed me the entire morning.

"You look so beautiful, Willa," Safiya told me encouragingly. "I think tonight will be so fun. You're going to be so good for Grayson, he needs a girl like you."

"Definitely," Mira chimed in agreement, though I could not see her face as I had to keep my head perfectly still. Her long, thin fingers ran through my hair, carefully parting it piece by piece as she wrapped it around the curling wand, and she stood so that my face was inches from her chest. I tried to hold my breath and keep my body still, not wanting to disrupt her.

"I'm nervous," I admitted to them, trying not to let the extent of how nervous I was show in my voice.

"Don't be," they both said at once, and I couldn't help but smile at their speaking in sync.

"I know something that'll help your nerves," Safiya told me, raising an eyebrow mischievously.

"Safiya, no!" Mira gasped, giggling, but Safiya had already dropped her mascara onto the bathroom counter, moving to root through her large, puffy purse and emerging with a flask.

"I don't think I should," I told her, remembering Mira's birthday party. It felt like so long ago now, like another life. My stomach was still doing somersaults.

"Oh, you two are no fun," Safiya pouted, taking a swig despite us.

"It's two in the afternoon—you're going to be blacked out by the time we pull up. They probably won't even let you in!" Mira said, trying to sound scolding, but I could hear the obvious amusement in her voice.

"I'll be fine, I'm not a lightweight like you," Safiya giggled, and this was all it took for Mira to cave. She dropped the lock of my hair she'd been holding, still holding the curling iron in one hand, and grabbed the flask with the other, taking a long swig. She held it out to me, smiling.

"It's not that bad," she said to me. "It probably will help you calm down a little." I looked between the two girls, the bathroom feeling horribly small. The room had heated up from the three of us all being squished inside and the curling iron stayed plugged in for so long, and I felt uncomfortably sweaty. I knew I looked wild with half of my hair curled, no makeup, and the red flush of heat in my cheeks. It was only two months ago that I had refused to drink, shocked and

horrified that the rest of the group had. I was in the group now, though, wasn't I? This was every girl's dream, wasn't it? To be getting ready with her group of girlfriends, sneaking alcohol from their parents and going to meet a boy.

"Okay, okay, hand it over," I responded, and the girls cheered, handing me the flask and chanting,

"Willa, Willa, Willa!" I took a large gulp, gasping after it went down my throat. I was pretty sure that it was straight vodka, and it burned so intensely that I felt it in my stomach, the heat moving through my body and settling beneath my chest. I coughed, and Safiya and Mira giggled at me, which hurt my feelings a little, but I tried to just smile at them.

"Let me finish her hair, Safiya. You're so bad," Mira reprimanded through a large grin. The three of us went back to our tasks, Safiya finishing her makeup and running to grab our dresses out of Mira's closet. We'd left them at Mira's simply due to the sheer size of her closet--they all fit in her ginormous walk-in much better than they would have in my or Safiya's small wardrobes. We had all gone to buy them a few weeks prior, and I'd only tried mine on once. Safiya told us as she lugged them into the bathroom that she had been trying hers on every single day since its purchase.

"You haven't been to my house every single day since you bought it," Mira said.

"I've been breaking in to try it on," Safiya responded playfully, giving us her evil grin. As she started pulling her dress on, Mira finished curling my hair. She set down the iron and ran her fingers through the curls, letting them fall into more natural waves. When I stood up to look in the mirror, I fluffed them out slightly, giving myself a smile. Mira stood behind me, looking at me with pride.

"You look beautiful," she said happily. I made eye contact with her in the mirror, wishing that I could read her mind. Her eyes looked glossy. Safiya came up behind us then.

"Come here, Willa. You want me to do your makeup," she told me, and Mira backed away to go put on her dress.



Another hour later, and the three of us were ready, giving Mira's mom a hug goodbye after she took all of our photos. Safiya wore a tight, strapless emerald colored dress that hugged her figure. The top was heart shaped and slit open between her cleavage, adorned with golden sequins. The dress stopped short at the top of her thigh on one side so that the skirt arched long and billowy around her other half, leaving one long leg exposed. She looked absolutely stunning, but Mira was the definite show stopper. She wore a simple, satin slip dress with spaghetti straps. It was short and semi-flowy with a plunging neckline. The dress hugged her chest and hips, and it was a shade of pink that looked as soft as her skin. She held a matching miniature pink purse and wore minimal gold jewelry. It was ten times more plain than Safiya's outfit, but Mira made it look so elegant that the two couldn't compare. I felt almost embarrassed of my own dress-- a short, one-shoulder cocktail dress. It was black and sequined, simple and non-revealing, and I wore it with black heels from Mira and the necklace that she had stolen for me at the mall. I also had a matching nude bag, another item from Mira's wardrobe.

"We're going to be the most gorgeous girls there," Safiya exclaimed, pulling us in for a group hug. She stumbled slightly in the embrace, Mira and I catching her. Between the three of us, we had finished her flask, but Safiya had chugged most of it, and I was genuinely concerned that we would not be let into the dance. We all carefully walked to Mira's car, helping Safiya into the passenger seat.

"Are you okay to drive, Mira?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, exasperated, waving me off. "I'll make Grayson drive the rest when we pick him up."

Sure enough, when we got Grayson, he told Mira to take the backseat with me. He looked nice too, wearing a simple black button up, black pants, and a red bow tie. I would not have taken him as the type to wear a bow tie, and I giggled to myself in the backseat. Everyone in the car gave me a look, but I kept my thoughts to myself, biting my lip. As Grayson drove, Mira and I whispered to each other in the backseat, placing our bets on who we thought would wear what. Each time she leaned over to whisper something in my ear, she would drunkenly get too close

and her lips would brush against my skin, and I would remember our kiss. I tried to tell the rising butterflies in my stomach to go away, but they persisted.

Grayson parked the car, helping Safiya out, and we all stumbled towards the gymnasium entrance, linking arms to keep from falling. The sun was just beginning to set, and the light before dusk shone down on all of us, making everyone look as if they were glimmering. I took one last look at each of us before we walked up to the entrance, soaking in the golden hour glow. We all looked so beautiful. They checked my and Mira's student IDs, wrote in Safiya and Grayson as our guests, then let us in, and I was surprised to see the decorations. Towards the back of the gym were tables under white table cloths covered in snacks and drinks, placed carefully behind the large empty space to be used as the dance floor. Fairy lights were strung up across the make-shift dance floor, and a DJ was shoved near the front corner. Balloon arches adorned the sides near the bleachers, and the lights were dimmed low. It actually looked quite nice-- almost like something out of a movie.

"Miss Willa, I will absolutely need a dance from you tonight, but let me please take Miss Shit-faced Safiya before she pukes everywhere," Grayson said teasingly, tipping an imaginary hat to me as if we were at a ball. Safiya smacked his arm, rolling her eyes, but I waved them off, unphased. He steered her out onto the dance floor, basically holding her up as she swayed unsteadily.

"Next year they're going to implement breathalyzers," I said, shaking my head watching them.

"Aw, she's fine," Mira said fondly, watching. "Grayson likes having a damsel in distress to take care of. You're too responsible," she said to me. I looked back at her, rolling my eyes.

"More like you're a bad influence," I said back. She gave me a light, teasing smack to the arm.

"I love influencing you," she joked. "Now c'mon, are we going to dance or what?" I set my bag down near the pile that the girls had started of handbags and high heels that were too large to dance in. We walked out to the dance floor arm in arm and swayed in an exaggerated manner. I twirled her around, and she laughed gently, letting me pull her close to my chest. We

danced mostly just holding hands across from one another and pulling ourselves together and apart. It was silly and casual, and while we danced, I watched the couples dancing more genuinely, gazing into each other's eyes. Mira caught me watching everyone else and led me to Safiya and Grayson, misunderstanding my thoughts. She grabbed Safiya's elbow, pulling her away from Grayson and hip bumped me towards him.

*Have fun*, she mouthed with enough emphasis that someone across the room would have been able to read her lips. I looked up at Grayson, giving him the shy smile that I hoped looked adorable and endearing. He put his hands on my waist, holding me with a sturdy grip, and I reached up to put my hands around his neck. We moved gently. I had to keep reminding myself to breathe, noticing that I kept holding my breath until my vision would get spotty.

"You're a good dancer," he said.

"Oh, thank you," I responded. "Hopefully better than Safiya." We both laughed.

"That's not even a question," he assured me. We danced for a few more songs, chatting until I excused myself to go to the bathroom, feeling like I desperately needed to reapply my lip gloss. I grabbed my bag off the floor, walking quickly, thinking I would just be a moment. When I checked my reflection in the mirror, I stopped to look at her for a few moments. Safiya had done such dramatic makeup on me that I didn't think I looked very much like myself, but I thought I looked pretty. I was wearing false eyelashes for the first time ever, and I ever so slightly brushed them up with my finger, careful not to move them. I was rummaging through my handbag when I heard the bathroom door open. I instinctively looked up, finding myself face to face with a girl that looked strikingly familiar, but was definitely not one I'd ever met.

"Do you know who I am?" She asked me. Her voice sounded strange, and she looked around as if we were cornered. I took a centimeter step back, worried that she was insane. Her eyes looked wide and wild. I held my little tube of lip gloss-- I'd just pulled it out as she walked in-- and my hand was balled into a tight fist around it.

"You're Safiya's twin," I realized, speaking cautiously. She had the same height, the tall, tan legs. Her face was nearly identical, with full, pink lips and a heart-shaped face. Their biggest difference was that the twin wore her hair short and natural, making her look more youthful.

“My name is Leila,” she told me. “Safiya would probably kill me if she knew I was talking to you right now. But I need to talk to you. I’m really worried about her.”

“Why?” I asked uncertainly, finding myself strangely frightened. My heart did little jumping jacks in my chest, and I took a slow breath in and out through my nose, hoping Leila didn’t notice my nerves. I had no idea why she was so terrifying to me, but I couldn’t help but wonder if something happened in this tiny little bathroom how long it would take Grayson to notice if I didn’t come out.

“Ever since she became friends with Mira and Grayson she’s been so... different,” Leila said unhappily. The nervous energy that she had been emulating began to deflate like a balloon, leaving her more sad and small. “She’s like a completely new person. We used to be best friends, and I think that Mira and Grayson are really sketchy people. I just wanted to tell you to be careful. I know you’re friends with all of them, but you don’t know my sister. You don’t know how she was... before them.” Leila didn’t bother to wait for my response, turning on her heel and almost sprinting for the door, wiping tears off of her cheeks. I stood alone in the bathroom for a moment, fists still curled, not knowing what to do. My heart was beginning to slow down, and I tried to evaluate what just happened, finding myself unable to wrap my head around the strange interaction. Finally, I managed to stumble hesitantly back out to the gym. The music seemed so much louder exiting the bathroom, and I resisted the urge to cover my ears. I scanned the room for my friends, realizing that I’d never even gotten the chance to reapply my lip gloss. I found Safiya, Mira, and Grayson at the punch table, Safiya letting her drink slosh out of the sides of her plastic cup each time she talked, and a chaperone watching them disapprovingly but silently from the corner.

“What took you so long?” Mira asked me as I walked up. I looked between the three of them, about to tell them, but found myself unable to. I watched Safiya again, trying to imagine her softer and younger, resembling her twin even more closely.

“Um, I just don’t think I feel so good,” I explained, thinking this wasn’t even entirely a lie. I suddenly couldn’t stop thinking about Mira stealing the necklace, and I fidgeted with it between my forefinger and thumb.

“That’s okay, we can leave,” Grayson said. “This kinda blows anyway.” Safiya tried to protest, but Mira strangely sided with Grayson.

“Are you sure?” I asked her. “I know how much you’ve been looking forward to this.” She and Grayson exchanged a brief glance, an interaction I couldn’t quite read.

“I’m sure,” Mira assured me, giving me a quick squeeze on the arm. Safiya begged us to stay, turning vicious when Grayson began to pull her towards the door, and she yelled at all of us that there was hardly a point in even coming at all. Our group trudged to the car. By now it was dark, and other than the sounds of Safiya’s complaints, the night was silent. The nighttime air was chill, and Mira and I walked arm in arm, huddling together for warmth. When we piled into the car, I tried to picture everyone as they looked walking into the gym, but now everyone looked tired and cast in a dark shadow. We drove in silence, and I found myself grateful when we arrived at Mira’s house.

“Willa, stay in the car. I have somewhere I want to take you,” Grayson said, breaking the somber quiet that had cast over all of us.

“Wait, let her walk us to the door at least,” Mira pleaded, and Grayson allowed, telling me to hurry back. We helped Safiya to the door, stopping on the front porch.

“Bye, Willa,” she said coldly, letting herself into Mira’s house. The door slammed shut behind her.

“I didn’t mean to ruin her night,” I told Mira helplessly, feeling slightly guilty. The mood had changed so quickly, and I internally cursed Leila for ruining our night. Why had she shaken me up so badly? Wasn’t she the villain-- coming to me and bad mouthing my closest friends?

“Oh, she’ll get over it,” Mira said offhandedly, waving a hand in the direction Safiya had stormed off in. I glanced at Grayson’s car in the driveway, then back at Mira. Her face was unreadable in the moonlight, her amber-colored eyes glossy.

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow then, if she’s calmed down by then,” I said, looking down at my feet.

“Yeah,” Mira responded, her voice thick.

“You okay?” I asked her.

“Yeah,” she repeated, this time sounding more sure of herself. We stood there for a moment, watching each other. Then she pulled me into an embrace, burying her face in my shoulder. I cautiously patted her on the back, unsure what was happening. I wondered if she somehow knew about the interaction with Leila at homecoming. When we pulled apart, Mira didn’t look back at me, turning quickly and letting herself into the house. The door closed behind her more slowly than it had for Safiya, leaving me just enough time to see her wipe her eyes as she walked away.

I came back to the car, climbing into the passenger seat next to Grayson.

“You don’t think Mira will mind that you’re taking her car for a joy ride?” I asked him teasingly. I felt the desperate need to lighten the mood after Mira’s strange behavior and Safiya’s tantrum. Now that the two were out of the car, I thought Grayson and I might be getting a fresh slate.

“Oh, she’ll mind alright,” he told me, his voice getting serious. “She’s going to call the police on us, Willa. We’re going to have to escape Bloomington. We’ll be living on the run.” I laughed, realizing that he was joking and that he too was ready to move on from the sudden turn of the night.

“We’ll have to change our names,” I responded with a straight face. Grayson put his arm around the back of my seat to look behind him as he reversed out of Mira’s driveway. I studied his focused expression, watching his dark eyes.

“You’re going to have to start going by Mugwort Poodle,” he said solemnly, which made me giggle, and I lightly smacked his arm.

“Mugwort Poodle?” I asked him between laughs.

“It’s the perfect undercover name. Nobody would expect someone as gorgeous as you would ever willingly choose it,” he explained.

We continued to joke as he drove, and I paid little attention to our surroundings. His typically intimidating presence was gone as if it never existed— leaving such a normality that I almost felt like laughing at my original timidity when we first met. Despite being Mira’s car, all

I could smell was his cologne, and I couldn't help but to breathe it in happily. The smell of his cologne was woody and smoky, almost as if he had just come from a fire pit on a camping ground. It was shockingly average, and I pondered how I'd never noticed it before.

We finally stopped in front of a typically tiny, suburban home. It looked like every other house in the neighborhood except for the fact that all of the lights inside were off.

"Is this your house?" I asked, turning to Grayson with surprise. I'd never been to his house before, and, to my knowledge, I didn't think Safiya or Mira had either.

"Yeah. I wanted to bring you inside. Is that okay?" He asked me. I mulled this over in my head for a moment. My parents did expect me home after the dance-- my mom had made this clear-- but we'd left so early, and the night was still young. They'd probably assume I was still at school.

"That's okay," I responded with a shy smile. He came around and opened my car door from me, following me up to the small front porch. Other than a worn welcome mat, the porch was bare of furniture. Grayson reached around me to open the door, and it quickly occurred to me that he'd just left it unlocked. But before I could react to this thought, I was seeing the inside of the house, and I was blown away. He had stepped inside to turn on the lights, and he chuckled as he grabbed my hand and pulled me inside, watching me react to the room.

The interior did not match any home in Bloomington that I'd ever been inside. The furniture was sleek and dark, the room dimly lit in the way that nice restaurants tried to achieve. The paneled walls were dark green. The windows on the wall were draped in large, dark curtains that covered them entirely, letting no moonlight in. The curtains were so dramatically thick that they completely barred the outside world— you would never know if it was day or night, it would all be the same in this room. The fireplace was already lit, filling the room with a warm, dancing glow. Despite the house's small exterior, this room felt so massive that I'd have believed him if he told me we had walked through a portal into someone's elegant mansion instead.

"What do you think?" he asked me.

"It's stunning," I said in a hushed voice, feeling as if this were a space that I couldn't talk too loudly. We sat down on the couch in front of the fireplace. Grayson lit a small candle on the

coffee table that filled the room with the smell of cinnamon. The scent made the room smell more homey, but the more I looked around, the more it appeared to not really be lived in. Nothing was out and about, there were no dents in the cushions suggesting that he watched television on the couch at night. Everything was tucked away in its spot, with no suggestions they would ever be moved. We sat down on the couch, leaving a space between us. I set my handbag down on the coffee table.

“Where are your parents?” I asked him.

“My mom works overnight shifts. My dad is dead,” he told me.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry,” I said, putting a hand on his knee. I had no idea his dad had died. Mira never told me, and she told me just about everything about everyone.

“It’s okay,” he said back. “Not a lot of people know. It was a few years ago, but he wasn’t such a great guy. It was probably for the best for me and my mom.” I didn’t know what to say, so I just stayed silent with my hand on his knee, avoiding meeting his eyes.

“It’s okay, Willa,” Grayson repeated, putting a hand on my chin and lifting my head to meet my eyes. Some of my nerves began to make their way back to my body. We looked at each other for several beats, and then he offered me a glass of wine. I thought back to the vodka that I had been drinking earlier that day, and I knew it was entirely out of my system now. I felt almost soul-crushingly sober-- aware of every minute feeling in my body-- so I agreed, begging him not to fill my glass up too much. He ducked into the kitchen for only a moment, emerging with a bottle and two plain glasses. Grayson sat back down next to me, filling up our cups, and the first sip surprised me. It was so sweet and rich. Red and dark as blood, I decided that actually I quite liked it, drinking it down quickly. Where the vodka in Safiya’s flask had burned, the wine just settled warmly in my stomach, keeping me happy and flushed. After a glass, we began playing “Never Have I Ever”. I was so happy and giddy that almost all of his prompts made me laugh. I noticed him sneak more into my cup when he thought I wasn’t looking, but I didn’t stop him. I had been so nervous for this night, but now that we were alone and drinking, feeling completely disconnected from the rest of the world, I felt as if the rest of the evening were a million miles



away. Knowing that he liked me, I felt very attractive and powerful, something I did not often feel.

“Never have I ever... failed a class,” Grayson said, still holding seven fingers up. I had gotten him out for breaking a bone, losing his virginity, and traveling out of the country. I still had all ten fingers up.

“Do you really think that I have failed a class before, Grayson Loneman?” I asked, feigning offense.

“No, Willa Carter, but I had to give it a try,” he retorted easily.

“Okay, okay, my turn,” I said back, giggling. He poured yet another sip of wine into my glass, and I gave him a playful push, keeping my ten fingers up. Grayson had been almost hysterically funny tonight, almost a bit to my surprise. I wondered if it was me that had put him in such a good mood. This thought made me prideful. I was shocked by myself that I was so pleased with his crush on me. Before tonight, this thought had only scared me.

“Never have I ever gotten a tattoo,” I said. Grayson slowly put a finger down, and I shrieked, “WHERE?”

Grayson laughed without humor, putting his foot up on the couch. He pulled down his sock, revealing a small tattoo on his ankle of an ugly type of bird. I realized, with a jolt, it was a vulture, the same bird that had been flocking my house. At that moment, I uneasily told myself this was an odd coincidence. I reached towards him and lightly brushed the tattoo with the tip of my finger.

“Why would you get that?” I asked, knowing how rude it sounded once it was out of my mouth, but unable to keep my curiosity to myself.

“I’ve had it for a long time,” he said. Grayson quickly pulled his sock back up, concealing the tattoo. I waited for him to say more, but realized this was all I was going to get. Another night, I would’ve had a million questions, but tonight my thoughts felt so heavy from the wine. After a moment of thinking, he said,

“Never have I ever... gone skinny dipping.”

“Pervert,” I giggled, keeping my fingers up.

“You’re a prude!” he retorted, laughing. “Is there anything you *have* done?”

“I take great offense to that,” I said, giving him a fake pout. I reached over for the bottle of wine, astonished to realize it was almost empty. How did that happen? I didn’t think I’d had *that* much. I wondered how late it was. Were my parents home? I tried to sit up a little straighter, feeling slightly dizzy. My body was oddly light.

“Grayson, what time is it?”

“It’s still early,” he told me. “Don’t worry.” I looked into those black eyes, trying to find some sort of emotion behind them.

“Okay...” I said finally, twirling my ring. I had the strange suspicion that he was perfectly sober. This thought startled me, and I tried to shake it off, telling myself that was ridiculous. I hadn’t drunk the entire bottle by myself. He watched me push the ring between my middle and pinky finger. I tried to let myself relax again. Everything was fine.

“C’mon, it’s your turn,” Grayson said, leaning back on the sofa. His curly hair fell ever so slightly into his eyes.

“Okay,” I repeated, noticing how slurred it sounded coming out of my mouth. I hesitated, realizing that this was the moment that Mira had been training me for. “Never have I ever... been kissed.” Grayson laughed, then, noticing my glare, went,

“Oh. Oh my god, Willa, you’re serious.”

“I’m serious,” I told him. I had told myself virtually every single day that the kiss between Mira and I had not counted, but the two words coming out of my mouth sounded like a lie.

“Well, I think we have to fix that,” he whispered. The energy of the room shifted, both of us becoming deathly still. It felt like time froze, like everything outside of the small house stopped. My heart was beating so loudly that I thought he must be able to hear it. Grayson leaned forward, closer to me, brushing a piece of hair behind my ear. His hand lingered on my face, both of us holding our breaths as we watched each other. His other hand rested on top of mine, and he gently rubbed his thumb along my ring finger. I didn’t feel scared, but I didn’t feel lustful or wanting either. My body was trembling, my heart still racing, but my mind was quiet, as if I was

put into some sort of trance. His eyes were unreadable as they watched me, and if I stared too closely at them, I began to see double. Grayson came in closer, closer, his lips an inch from mine. My brain was buzzing, unable to process if I should pull away or close the gap between us. Before I could decide anything, he grabbed the back of my head, pulling me in. His lips touched mine, and I anticipated the electricity, the excitement, the overwhelming and burning desire.

But it didn't come.

I pulled myself back, staring at him with wide eyes. I felt slightly petrified by this feeling of pure disappointment. He hadn't felt like anything.