

She is alone.

It is only because of this that she can sleep. Sometimes she goes days without any sleep. Her brain is a whirling, swirling, racing thing that never stops. Especially when people are around.

There is a blanket of snow on the ground and a blanket of stars in the sky, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that it is 5:43 a.m on a Saturday. She lays crooked across her bed with a thin, yellowed sheet pulled across her. She has her leg thrown across a pillow. She is still wearing all of her clothes and her thickest, heaviest combat boots that help her feel grounded to the earth when she gets too high.

She snores, but it is a quiet snore. The kind of snore that a mother strains her ears to hear when her newborn is sleeping. A peaceful snore.

She sleeps next to a variety of items that she usually keeps in her purse. A blue rubber tourniquet, a sandwich baggie containing glue-colored powder, a spoon, a white lighter, a half-empty pint of Jim Beam and an empty syringe. It wasn't empty before. The contents of it are rushing through her veins, inhibiting her neurons, slowing everything down. The *Slow Down* is essential. If it wasn't for the *Slow Down*, Lennox is afraid that her brain will spin so fast that she will die. In retrospect, she figures the *Slow Down* will make her brain act like a normal person's brain.

In retrospect, she is wrong.

The *Slow Down* does something it has never done before. Blood races through arteries and veins, sending ethanol from the whiskey to her muscles, heart and brain. Red blood cells release oxygen molecules, trading them for carbon dioxide. White blood cells are alerted that there is an intruder, but the drug moves too fast, finding nerve cells, moving through the ganglionic fibers quickly. Her blood pressure lowers. Her brain is coaxed into such a relaxed state that for a moment, it forgets to do one of the most important jobs it's meant to do.

Lennox forgets to breathe.

The snoring stops. The only sound is a car creeping down the road below. The tires roll across slush. Then it is gone, and the room is quiet.

Exactly thirty-seven seconds later her apartment door creaks open. A man steps into the room. He stands still for a moment, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. He spots her on the bed. Her dark hair fans out around her.

"Len?"

He doesn't see the needle, but he hears the silence. It is heavy and crushes down all around him. It is the lack of snoring. It is the lack of breathing. It is the occasional *drip* of water falling into the sink and then nothing else.

There is regular, ordinary silence when the house is asleep and then there is forbidding, ominous silence that hangs heavy in the air when something bad has happened. The man knows the difference.

He rushes to her side and accidentally knocks an ash tray off the bed. It hits the hardwood floor and shatters into fragments.

"Lennox? Oh god."

He presses two fingers against her wrist. His hands shake too much for him to check for her pulse. Instead, he rolls her onto her back. He lays her head back and breathes into her mouth, like he's watched people do in the movies. He pushes his hands against where he thinks her heart is. Her breast feels solid under his palms. He pushes harder and winces when her chest makes a crunching sound.

A broken rib is the least of her worries, though.

He pulls his cheap Net 10 phone out of his pocket and dials 9-1-1. He is talking to the nasally-sounding woman when he notices the heroin and the syringe for the first time. He grabs them both and hides them in his coat pocket. Even though it is so cold in the small apartment he can see his breath, he is still sweaty under his t-shirt. He snaps the phone shut and stands up.

"I'm sorry, Lennox," he whispers before leaving the apartment. He leaves the front door open.

He doesn't know that the CPR has worked. He doesn't know that inside of her, her brain is working through a fog. Her heart beats again. Tiny bursts send neurotransmitters through the synapses of her brain. Her neurons sluggishly remind her lungs that she needs oxygen. She *needs* oxygen. She takes in a short, sharp breath.

Sirens wail somewhere down the road.

She is alone.

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Lennox can see the lights before she opens her eyes. They are bright white blinding things overhead. They are swooping and looping into her vision and it's all she can do to not panic.

Is it heaven?

Lennox has only been to church twice in her life. The first time she slept. This was back when she was still a child and she could sleep whenever she wanted, and sometimes even when she didn't want to. Her brain worked like everybody else's, synapses firing slowly and only when they were supposed to. She was five, and she slept against her mother. Her hands had been sticky from eating caramel apple suckers during Sunday School. Her mom's arms were solid and warm. These are the details she can remember the clearest.

The second time she was nineteen. She had gone after shooting heroin. She was high and sometimes when she got high she thought maybe God could save her from doing it again. She had heard stories of other people getting sober with religion. She had sat in the back pew of the church wearing her faded jeans and Nirvana t-shirt. She can't remember what the preacher had looked like or what the service had been about, but she can remember the way the light bulb over top of her had buzzed loudly and flickered through the whole thing. She can remember the way

she had buzzed, the high resonating through her completely, waking her up and making her numb.

There is a beeping sound too. Rhythmic. *Beep, beep, beep*. Every two seconds or so. Lennox can't really tell. Time passes by her like a kaleidoscope, broken and in vibrantly different fragments. She braces herself against the light and peels her eyelids open.

She is in a hospital room. So, not heaven. Hell.

She feels foolish for even considering heaven. People like her don't get to go to heaven.

Lennox feels sluggish and empty. She moves her hands across her body until she can find the IV line that snakes out of the bend of her arm. She wonders briefly how they were able to find a vein. It is no easy feat finding a vein in her arms anymore. She knows this too well.

She pulls the IV out of her arm. She has seen lots of people do this on tv with a straight face. She cringes. There is a heavy trickle of blood that spills out and she presses her hand against it.

She needs to get out of the hospital. She knows people will want to ask questions. Why was she shooting up? Where did she get the drugs? She leans forward and gasps. A sharp pain explodes in the left side of her chest and she grabs her side. She has to bite her lip to keep from crying out loud.

She feels shattered on the inside. She forces herself to take shallow breaths. She did not feel the pain in her ribs before but sitting up was enough to set it off. Her ribs. Is one of them broken? She was in her apartment alone when she scored, so how did she manage to break a rib?

It is hard to keep from panicking. She wills her heart to slow and her brain begins to race to put together the pieces of the puzzle. She was alone, but now she is here. Her rib is probably broken. Someone found her. Someone found her and called the cops and they brought her here because she was so out of it. She moves more slowly now, scooting her legs toward the edge of the bed.

Did she do something to break her rib? She can't remember leaving her apartment, but she knows it is possible that she did.

A nurse bursts into the room then. She has curly, wild blonde hair and the darkest skin Lennox has ever seen. She wears black, thick-rimmed glasses and pink scrubs. "Hey! You're awake," she says, smiling. She plucks a penlight from her pocket and shines it into Lennox's eyes.

Lennox leans back, feigning defeat. When the nurse leaves she will find a way out. She spots her name tag hanging around her neck. Sienna Combs, RN.

"Yeah, um, do you know when I can get out of here?" Lennox asks, feeling anxious.

Sienna presses a stethoscope against her chest, over her hospital gown. She listens for a moment. "Everything sounds good. Some people will be in to talk to you soon and we will start with the discharge papers."

Lennox considers pleading her case but decides against it. She figures she has more of a chance of getting out if the nurse thinks she's compliant. "What happened to my side?" she asks instead, gesturing towards her ribs.

Sienna's smile slips away, and she wraps her stethoscope around the back of her neck. "Cracked rib. Whoever called 911 performed CPR. They saved your life."

"I died?" Lennox doesn't mean to ask this question, but it slips out before she can think about it.

Sienna presses her glasses close to her face. She grabs a folder and starts to flip through it. "You, um, you were found at your apartment unresponsive. Someone called 911 and said you had stopped breathing. They said they had performed CPR and wasn't sure if it worked and that they heard a cracking noise. When paramedics got there, you were alone." She flips the folder shut and crosses her arms. "We gave you Narcan. All your symptoms pointed to heroin overdose. We also done a scan and confirmed that you have a cracked rib."

Her voice is very clinical. Lennox wonders how many times she has had to give this speech before to other addicts. She fidgets, wishing she had real clothes on and not the thin white hospital gown.

"Who called 911?" she finally says.

Junkie bitch.

The words enter Lennox's head, soft as smoke. She blinks twice and looks at Sienna.

"What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything," she responds with a blank look on her face.

"I asked you who called 911?"

Sienna checks her IV. She notices that Lennox has pulled it out of her arm but doesn't comment on it. She hooks the IV line over the pole. "I don't know." She looks at Lennox seriously for a moment. "Look. I shouldn't say anything, but I think you should stay and talk to the people who want to talk to you. They are counselors. They can hook you up with rehabilitation centers that will help you."

Junkie bitch. Last thing she needs is rehab. She needs to be locked up.

The words are more clear. Lennox shakes her head. The movement is too fast and her head spins. "No. I'm fine. I'll be fine on my own."

Sienna shrugs a little and moves toward the door. She stops and throws one more glance back at Lennox. "You were really bad off. You're lucky to be alive. Someone gave you a second chance." She pauses, her face solemn. "Don't throw it away."

Lennox stays still until Sienna leaves the room and then she lets out a sigh of relief.

Her brain is spinning, whizzing, trying to comprehend. She imagines chemicals being released into her brain where they shouldn't be. Is she going crazy? Crazy people don't wonder if they are crazy though.

Also, she *died*. Even though she has been shooting heroin for five years and she has always known the risks, it is a ridiculous prospect. She relates death to things that are grey and still and quiet. She feels anything but. She tries to lean back and relax but the room is tilting and the colors are too bright. She feels like she can't breathe.

Lennox sits up in the bed, slowly this time, ignoring the biting pain in her ribs. She presses her bare feet against the cold floor and stands up. The room tilts hard for a moment and she has to hold onto the bed to keep from falling. When everything sets straight she walks slowly to the closet and finds her clothes and shoes in a plastic bag. She pulls her hospital gown off and lets it fall to the floor. She dresses slowly while her brain runs in a million different directions. Red Ohio state hoodie. Ripped jeans. Black combat boots.

She cracks her door open and looks down the hallway before treading out. There is nobody but an elderly man sitting in a wheelchair drinking coffee. She walks right by him, her breath caught in her throat. The door to the stairs is on her left and she takes it, trying hard not to run.

Three flights of stairs later she is finally outside in the sunlight. It sparkles brightly all around her, dazzling white hot. She has to blink against it. She walks blindly down the sidewalk, wanting to put as much distance between her and the hospital as possible.

She walks to her apartment. Her ribs are on fire by the time she makes it but she forces herself to walk up the stairs to her apartment. Her door is unlocked and she lets herself in, exhaling for what feels like the first time in hours.

The air in her apartment is cold. Her bed is unmade. There are cigarette butts and broken shards of glass on the floor beside of her bed. Worst of all, her stash is gone. Lennox collapses on her bed, her eyes burning. The words *Junkie bitch* running through her head. Her throat is tight and she swallows hard, trying to force the tears away.

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The weather is changing.

Thatcher likes mid-seasons more than the actual seasons themselves. There is something monotonous about Spring rain every day but when Spring starts to turn into Summer you will see a rare warm day every now and then when you can walk outside and blink up at the sky. Thatcher likes that. There is something about a mid-season that makes him feel like he's shedding away the past and starting something new.

It is Winter but there are only two weeks left until Spring. When he found Lennox it had been snowing outside but the snow has melted. It is not too cold to walk so he walks to work and only wears a thin grey jacket to cover his arms. The sky is ashen and huge. It looks close to the ground and Thatcher swears someone standing on top of a building could possibly reach out and touch it.

He wears ear buds but isn't listening to any music. Instead he is thinking about Lennox. He is thinking about her still, dead heart behind her chest. He is wondering if she pushed too much powder on purpose. He is wondering if she is alive still or if she is somewhere cold and stiff in a morgue. The thought makes him feel chilled all over. He can't imagine Lennox as a dead thing. She is too vibrant and loud and alive all of the time.

He is also thinking about the heroin. The brownish-white drug he took from her apartment. He had told himself at the time he was taking it in case the cops showed up. Maybe he could use it as an excuse to talk to her again. Here's your heroin back, you're welcome. That kind of thing. But he flushed it instead. It called to him from the cabinet above his refrigerator. He couldn't sleep with it in his house. He couldn't think, couldn't breathe. It was so close, the closest he had been to it since he had quit. So he had grit his teeth and flushed the damn thing.

He regrets it now. What will he do if he finds out Lennox didn't make it? He hasn't used in so long. It would be hard to make a new connection. Especially without Lennox. But he can't allow himself to think like that. He isn't going to need to use again. No way, no how.

The air is crisp and he pulls in a deep breath. He longs for a cigarette but he is broke until he gets paid again. He hates working at the 9-and-Dime but at least there is the paycheck. He gets paid every Friday, no matter what. He has never had that kind of security in his life.

He gets to the gas station five minutes before clock-in. Sonja Salazar is there, bags under her eyes from working the graveyard shift. She smiles when she sees him. "Thank God you're here. I am ready to lose my damn mind."

He shrugs his jacket off. "Bad night?"

"Like you can't imagine. Assholes all morning. Everybody got something to say today." It is the usual. Sonja hates the job even more than Thatcher does. She has worked at the gas station for twenty-two years and counting. She is an overweight woman, with yellowed short hair and bad teeth. But she is smart as a tack and Thatcher knows that she could get a lot better if she just had the opportunity to prove herself.

"Well, you always got something to say too, Sonja," he teases. She ruffles his hair and pats him on the back.

"Got to with these idiots, honey. Have you ever heard anything about Lennox?" Sonja is the only person Thatcher has told about Lennox overdosing. He glances around him to make sure the gas station is empty.

"Yeah, about that..."

Sonja raises an eyebrow and Thatcher thinks twice about asking her. He knows she won't say no even if she wants to. She has always had a soft spot for him that he can't figure out.

"I was wondering if you would care if I just went to the hospital and checked her out. I won't be long. Thirty minutes. I was going to go earlier and I..."

She stops him. "It's okay. Go on. I'll be alright for another thirty minutes. Go see if your girl is okay."

"She's not my girl." His voice is snappier than he means it to be. He presses his lips together and tries again. "She hasn't been my girl for a year now. Lennox..."

Sonja shakes her head. "It's okay, Thatch. I understand. Go on, now. Take your time. I'll be here making your money while you're gone." She gives him a little wink.

Thatcher walks out with his head down. He forgets his jacket but he doesn't mind the slight chill in the air. Instead he feels guilty for asking Sonja to stay. All so he can go see Lennox, who he is sure doesn't give two shits about him.

Her *hair*, though. He can't stop thinking about her dark hair fanned out around her against the thin sheet. He can't stop thinking about what it felt like to once be able to pull his fingers through it. About how it tossed around her when they would drive around with the windows all the way down. He can't stop picturing her standing in the bathroom in her underwear with a curling iron, her face so focused.

He walks slowly, more slowly than he should considering how tired Sonja must be. But he is afraid. He is afraid of showing up at the hospital and them telling him that she was brought there but she died. He is more afraid of showing up and Lennox actually being there, pale and tired in some lonely hospital bed. He doesn't know what to say to her. They haven't talked in months. He doesn't know if he should tell her that he was there and he called the cops.

She will want to know what he was doing there, too, and Thatcher doesn't know what to tell her. He hasn't seen her in months. He hadn't planned on walking four miles out of the way

and letting himself into her apartment. He had been walking home from work and found himself standing in front of her building. Why had he even gone there?

Even if he had called 911 in time, Lennox would still be pissed about his coming around. He was sure of it. But he has to see if she is okay. It is like a splinter in his mind, the gnawing worry that she didn't make it, and he knew he wouldn't be able to get her off his mind until he found out one way or another.

He can see the hospital in the distance when his phone rings. He almost doesn't answer it, but then he thinks about Sonja alone at the gas station and he flips his phone open. The numbers on the screen swirl and loop and he stops walking. He hasn't seen Lennox's number on his phone since last Summer, but he knows it by heart. It is a jolt of familiarity and he almost doesn't hit the Accept button in time.

"Hey." He can hear the gruffness in his voice, and he coughs, trying to clear his throat. He can hear heavy breathing through the phone speaker. "Lennox? Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here." Her voice is crisp and airy and makes his hands shake. He fumbles around with his phone for a few seconds and then brings it back up to his ear.

"Oh hey. Um, shit. Are you okay?" He stutters over his words. She sighs a little, and he is hit with a memory of her face buried in his shoulder, her light breaths warm against the side of his face.

"I don't know. Are you at work? I was wondering if you could come over."

He turns back towards the gas station and walks a few steps before stopping and digging the toe of his shoe into a crack in the pavement. His skin prickles on the back of his neck and he tries to shrug the feeling off. "I'm actually on my way in to work right now."

Lennox breathes deeply and he can hear the shudder in her voice before she speaks, "I'm sorry, Thatcher. I just really need... someone, right now."

His skin feels cold and clammy and he suddenly wishes he had worn something heavier than the jacket. He pushes his hands through his hair. "Okay. I'll be right over."

He hears a click on the line and sees on the screen that she's ended the phone call. Lennox was never good at goodbyes. Thatcher pulls his jacket around him tighter and starts to jog towards her apartment. It occurs to him that he should turn around, he should stop. He shouldn't go there. Lennox is as much heroin as heroin is Lennox. But her *voice*. Thatcher thinks about her standing in a tank top and shorts, washing the dishes late at night with her hair tied up in a bun, and her voice sliding over the notes of whatever song she had stuck in her head.

He's at her apartment building before he thinks about Sonja again. He has already been gone for longer than thirty minutes, but if he's in and out of Lennox's apartment fast enough he can get back to her before the hour mark has passed. He shoves his phone in his pocket and starts the climb up the metal stairs to her apartment.

The door is already cracked open. He pushes it in and sees her, standing with her face to the window, her hair spilling all around her. She is whispering, her words hurried and low. He clears his throat and she turns around.

“Thatcher?”

It’s not Lennox, but her older sister Ettie. Ettie’s eyes are swollen and her cheeks are red.

Thatcher steps further into the room. “Hey, Ettie, I was looking for Lennox. She said she would meet me here.”

Ettie drops down on the worn-out couch with the frayed cushions that Thatcher and Lennox had found at a Goodwill when Lennox first got approved for her apartment. She blinks several times and then sighs. “Oh, Thatch. I thought you got clean.”

Thatcher finds the thermostat on the wall by memory and turns the heat up. The room is ice cold and his arms are covered in chill bumps. “I did get clean, Ettie. I’ve been clean for about a year. I’m not here for drugs.”

“Thatcher,” Ettie stops and rubs her hands together, “Lennox died last night. She overdosed.”

Thatcher shakes his head. His heart feels sluggish in his chest. “No, she didn’t. I did CPR. I saved her. Listen, I just talked to her on the phone. Someone must have told you wrong.”

Ettie’s eyes are unfocused and glassy. A tear rolls down her cheek. “I know you’re high and it’s hard for you to believe, but I seen her body. I went to the hospital this morning and... um, I identified her. They gave her Narcan, but her heart... it was just too much for so long. That’s what the doctor said.”

“I’m not high. Ettie. I’m not fucking high.”

Ettie reaches out and grabs Thatcher’s arm. She jerks his jacket sleeve up his arm and he notices the red mark in the crook of his elbow. “Sweetheart, Lennox overdosed, but they didn’t find any drugs here. You took them, didn’t you?”

“It’s not what it sounds like, though. I just didn’t want her to get into trouble. Can you imagine if Lennox had to go to jail? She wouldn’t last. She loves the sun too much.”

Ettie stands up fast and pushes her hands through her hair. “Damn it, Thatch. Listen to me. Lennox is dead. She’s dead. She’s gone, Thatcher.” She starts crying then, loud, breathy sobs that make her body shudder. “I don’t want to see you die too. It’s probably not a good batch. They’ve been lacing them with Fentanyl or something lately. I seen it on the news. You should probably go get checked out.”

“But her nurse, Sienna, said she was okay. She wanted her to go to rehab.”

Ettie’s eyes softens behind her tears and they look so much like Lennox’s that Thatcher starts to shake uncontrollably. “I didn’t see anyone there named Sienna. Did you even go to the hospital? Look, I know you love her. But she’s gone, Thatch.”

Thatcher jerks away from Ettie and spins towards the door. “I just talked to her on the phone earlier. I’m going to go find her. She’s okay, Ettie. I’ll go find her and she can tell you.”

He takes the steps to the ground floor two at a time, his chest pounding. Time loops and twists and he finds himself outside, his back pressed against the brick of the building. Snow crunches under his feet and he wonders when it snowed again.

The world wobbles so he slides to the ground, his jeans getting wet from the snow. His sleeves are still pulled up and he picks at the red spot on his arm. He thinks about the heroin above his refrigerator and he remembers it calling for him. He remembers how when he dissolved it in a spoon, it smelled like days laying around in bed with Lennox getting high. He remembers pushing it into his veins and the cold, silent rush that followed.

He remembers the words in his head. *Junkie bitch*. That's what he had called her. That was the last words he had said to Lennox. *I can't love a junkie bitch, anymore*. He told her he wouldn't. He swore to himself he wouldn't. But he still loved her. All that time apart and he still loved her.

A car goes by and throws slush up in his lap. The moon is white and heavy in the sky. He reaches out and tries to trace the edges of it with his finger when someone grabs his arm.

Lennox is smiling, her hair pushed back away from her face, her eyes burning bright. She grasps his hand in hers and cradles it against her cheek.

“Thatch. You're here.”