

I watch the girl as she repeatedly fiddles with the tiny box she has cupped in her hand. “Shit,” she whispers for the sixth time before fiddling with it again. “Shit.”

“Are you okay?” I ask.

I know that I have startled her because I’ve just spent the past hour pretending to be asleep. She doesn’t answer, simply turns out the reading light over her bed and faces the wall, fully clothed and on top of the covers. A few minutes later, she is snoring, but her back and shoulders are too rigid for her to actually be asleep.

So we’re both liars.

But so is everyone else in this place.

It’s my fourth time here. In four months I’ll be too old, so I have to come up with some kind of plan. It’s not that we’re expected to wake up on our eighteenth birthdays with the skills necessary to survive on our own, it’s just that Alan and Paul don’t have the resources to house so many people. They operate on the honor system – they don’t check birth certificates or anything like that – but the last thing I want is to screw them over.

I want to do *something* right.

When I wake up, the new girl is gone. I get dressed in the bathroom after my shower. I know that The House is a safe place, but I can never forget how my stepfather reacted when he learned I was binding my breasts. I don’t know my roommate well enough to be comfortable doing that in front of her. I don’t want any questions or strange looks.

I’ve had enough of those, thank you very much.

All of the other kids are quiet at breakfast. There are eleven of us right now. The new girl is there but as far away from everyone as she can get, hanging halfway off the edge of the bench at the

reclaimed picnic table where we eat. Alan is at work, so Paul is doing his best to strike up conversations as he dishes out pancakes and eggs. I sneak peeks at the new girl and recognize the way she carefully slices her pancakes and pours her syrup just so. She's pretending that she's not starving.

I corner her after breakfast. "We're roommates," I announce.

"So?"

"I'm Kate."

Her eyes are hazel, much more interesting than my boring, everyday brown. Last night's mascara has flaked onto her cheeks. "So?"

"Just wanted you to know, since we're sharing a room."

"That doesn't mean we have to talk to each other."

Paul pulls me aside while she's in the bathroom. "Give her some time," he says. "She's been through a lot."

I don't have to remind him that we've *all* been through a lot – it's the very reason he and Alan run an underground sanctuary for homeless teens. They know what we're going through.

That night, it's the same thing: the new girl is messing with that little box again. I know her name is Vicky, but only because Paul told me. I lay with my back to her and listen to her mutter "shit" until I fall asleep.

Vicky is pretending that she wasn't staring at me when I open my eyes. I had been having that nightmare again, the one where I'm back at home, except Mom is gone and it's just me and my stepfather and he throws away all of my clothes. He leaves me with nothing but "proper clothes," all frilly dresses and high heels and pink blouses. When I wake up, my mouth is dry and I instinctively reach for my Ace bandage. It's still there, in the corner of the bed.

“What’s your story?” Vicky asks.

“What’s yours?” I counter, waiting for my heart to slow down.

She shrugs and picks at her cuticles. “Folks kicked me out.”

I sit cross-legged on the mattress and pull the blanket up to my chin. “We hear that a lot around here.”

“How long have you been here?” Her face says that she’s kicking herself for showing interest.

“Only three weeks this time around. But it’s my fourth time.”

At this, her hazel eyes widen. “What’s up with that? Your parents keep kicking you out?”

I don’t tell her that I haven’t been home since I tried to go back after my first time here. I don’t tell her about the places I’ve slept, the things I’ve done to survive. “They’re not my parents,” I explain. “It’s my mom and my stepfather.”

“Did he...?”

“No, nothing like that. They just...they didn’t tell me to leave, they just made it impossible for me to stay.”

She looks at a corner of the ceiling. “I got a stepfather, too.”

I don’t have to ask her what that means; she probably doesn’t even realize how she crosses her arms over herself when she mentions him.

There are so many things I want to ask her, but I don’t want to scare her off. It seems wrong to assume that she’s queer because she’s here, but it also seems wrong to assume she’s straight because she doesn’t look like me. I have only had one relationship and no one would’ve ever suspected she liked girls; people take one look at me and they know right away.

“How old are you?” I say, because it seems like the safest question to ask.

“I’ll be seventeen next week. What about you?”

“I’ll be eighteen in August.”

“So that means you gotta be outta here by September, right?”

“That’s right.”

“What are you gonna do?”

I shrug. “Go someplace warm, I guess.” In case I have to sleep outside again.

She nods and slides off of her bed. “You coming to breakfast?”

“In a minute.”

Vicky’s eyes dart to my Ace bandage and away again. Had I blinked, I would’ve missed it.

“I’m going to stay with my sister once I turn eighteen,” Vicky says in the dark.

I try not to be jealous that she has someone that cares about her, jealous that she has a plan.

“Where’s that?”

“In Chicago. She has her own condo.” Her voice is overflowing with pride and awe.

“That’s cool.”

“I’m going to take the GED and find a job and get a place of my own.”

I lie in bed and toy with my bandage, which is crumpled into a ball. I don’t want Vicky to hear me crying. I had gone to a job interview that day and been rejected. The manager said that it was because they required a high school diploma but I’m certain it was more that they required someone not like me. I hate that I’m thinking of changing myself to be the way other people think I should be. I hate that I’m angered by Vicky’s hopefulness.

My roommate is gone when I awaken. I try not to panic, but Alan tells me that she is in the basement, taking inventory of supplies. We all have to pull our own weight around here; I usually handle the floors. Paul rests his head briefly on his partner’s shoulder while Alan is slicing fruit. I try to will myself to be happy for them instead of resentful.

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“What is that?” I ask when Vicky is messing with that little box again.

She automatically hunches herself over it, as if she expects me to try to take it from her.

“Nothing.”

“Doesn’t sound like nothing.” I’m too excited to sleep. We have been sharing a room for five weeks now, and tomorrow, I start my new job. It’s only stocking shelves at the ninety-nine cent store, but it’s something.

“You’ll think it’s stupid.”

“No I won’t.”

“You will.”

“Okay, fine.” I open the book that I keep next to the bed. I pretend I don’t feel her eyes on me.

“It’s just something someone gave to me,” she finally says.

“Someone? Like a boyfriend? A girlfriend?”

“Just...someone.”

“Someone important?”

“Yeah.” She is still fiddling with it and frowning, but at least she isn’t saying “shit” over and over again.

“What is it?” I press.

She holds it up but doesn’t move any closer to me. I lean over the edge of my bed and peer at the object dangling from her hand. It’s a keychain made to look like a slot machine, complete with a tiny moving handle. The one-armed bandit. My mom said that my grandmother had issues with the one-armed bandit.

“It’s good luck to get three cherries,” Vicky explains. “But all I get are lemons.”

“You believe in that stuff?”

“Not really,” she says defensively, but her eyes drop to the floor. “But the person who gave it to me told me that, so I keep trying.”

I’m dying to ask her who this important person is. If it was her sister, she would’ve said it. Instead, I ask, “What makes this person so important?”

“I dunno.” She turns out her light. Discussion over.

We have been lying silent in the dark for over an hour when she says, “They were the only person to ever make me feel beautiful.”

/ THINK YOU’RE BEAUTIFUL!

But I just mouth the words.

My birthday is two weeks away and I’m scared. The good news is that I am working full-time at the ninety-nine cent store. I’m going to learn to cashier for when Patsy goes on maternity leave, and I have a lead on a room for rent when it’s time to leave The House. I may not have to find a new city to live in, after all. Still, I’m terrified at the thought of truly being on my own forever.

I get back to the shelter after a double shift to find a small crowd in the hall. Paul and Alan are in a corner, conferring privately. “What’s going on?” I ask.

“Vicky’s having a breakdown,” one kid tells me.

“Alan thinks they should call 911,” another says.

I hear my roommate crying hysterically inside our room. “Let me talk to her.” I first poke my head in the room and then slip inside, shutting the door behind me. Vicky is on her bed in a ball and sobbing, rocking back and forth. I tentatively touch her hair. “What happened?” I ask, praying I can calm

her down. The last thing we want is to get the authorities involved – Paul and Alan could get into serious trouble and the shelter will be shut down.

To my surprise, Vicky grabs me. She has never touched me before, and my heart skips a beat. She clings to me and I just hold her while she cries. Alan pokes his head in and I wave him away. Soon, she's down to whimpers and sniffles. My uniform shirt is soaked when she finally pulls away.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I say when she seems more composed.

She doesn't speak, just points a shaky finger at some debris on the floor. I have to stare at it for a while before I realize it's the pieces of her keychain. At first I think she's upset because it's broken, but as I stoop to retrieve the pieces, I see what has gotten her so worked up: there's nothing but lemons on the tiny reels that spin when you pull the lever.

"It's all a lie," she wails and begins to cry again.

"It's okay," I tell her. "It doesn't mean anything. You'll still do everything you planned and you'll be fine."

She stretches out in bed and turns to face the wall. "She lied to me," I hear her say. "She lied."

Two nights later, in the dark, Vicky confesses: "I don't really have a sister, Kate. I made it up."

I take a moment to process this information, my eyes wide and pointed straight ahead as I lie in my bed. "It's okay," I whisper. "I understand."

"What am I gonna do?"

I don't have an answer.

I get the materials I need from the ninety-nine cent store. I go to the library to work on my project because I don't want to be caught in the act. The next morning, I pretend I'm asleep at breakfast

time so I can leave the gift on Vicky's pillow. When I get home that night, she's crying again, cradling my offering in her hands. My heart sinks.

"You don't like it."

Her eyes are still beautiful even though they're bloodshot. "This is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me."

I can't speak around the lump in my throat, so I just shrug like it's no big deal. I sit on my bed and watch as she pulls the lever on the tiny slot machine, her face lighting up when three cherries appear in the display window. I had spent hours drawing them and then carefully cutting them out with sewing scissors so I could glue them over the lemons. I would do it every day to make her happy.

It's my last night at the shelter and sleep is the furthest thing from my mind. I have already taken my few belongings to my new place, and all I have with me is a change of clothes. I hear Vicky breathing in the next bed, and I fight back tears as I think of how much I'll miss that sound. The sun is coming up when she finally says my name.

"Will you wait for me?" she asks.

The emotion in me is so overwhelming that I actually feel faint even though I'm lying down. Speech is impossible, so I simply reach across our narrow room. She extends her arm and laces her fingers with mine. For the first time in my life, I know where I belong.