

Pull

The grocery store's curling neon letters glared devil-red in the frigid night. Nicholas ignored the sign as he hurried through the parking lot. He had to be here, that much was true, but he didn't need to linger. Lingering, like thinking, would only make it worse. He passed through the sliding glass doors, barely registering the temperature change, and glanced at the rows of carts crammed together like dead sardines. They weren't the gleaming, perfect silver from memory, but tarnished. Old. Seventeen years ago, he remembered trying to scratch the perfect right out of them. Failing that, he'd wedged lumps of gum on the underside of the handles instead, right where people wouldn't notice until it was too late. The gum was probably still there, on some of them.

No lingering, he reminded himself, and continued without taking one. A single bottle of wine didn't need a whole cart. He navigated around an ad-plastered island made of diet soda cartons and scanned the aisle signs. The font had changed: they were machine-printed in a scrawl

supposed to look handwritten but ended up just being unreadable. Despite that, he spotted the familiar “Wine & Spirits” sign poking out at the far end of the store above aisle twelve, the same place it had always been.

He cut through a register lane towards it while some Demi Lovato song warbled from the store speakers overhead. The store seemed empty—not many people here at ten-fifteen on a Thursday night. Hell, he wouldn’t be either, if not for Emily. It’s not like she needed the wine. No one needed wine.

He did a quick breathing treatment his therapist taught him. In, in, out. Inhale positivity, exhale frustration. He could do this. How often did one’s fiancé get their doctorate in psychology? Not very goddamn often. It was just a grocery store.

He turned the corner into the Wine & Spirits aisle. A shoulder-high rack of shelves ran down one side for wine and hard liquor. Down the other, an open-cooler loaded with an endless variety of beers, colorful and blocky. Charcoal and brick wall prints had been pasted over the tarnished chrome, and fake fireplace displays dotted the aisle every few feet, as if any of it made the five-dollar booze more sophisticated.

Near the middle of the aisle, an employee manhandled thirty packs into their respective sections. Nicholas hastened past him. Don’t look at the beer. No lingering. No thinking.

The wine selection was more extensive than he’d thought it would be. Thirty different bottles covered the shelves, three deep and three wide—Alero’s Cellars, Sunbeam Merlot, Bay Boxer Cabernet. Which one would Emily like?

As he weighed his options, a little girl, maybe eight or nine years old, came careening around the corner at the far end of the aisle, followed by an exhausted-looking construction

worker type Nicholas assumed was her father. The man aimed straight for the thirty-packs while the girl sang along to the Demi Lovato song, trying to match the tune but failing in that cute way only kids can manage.

Nicholas found himself analyzing the man. He couldn't help himself. It was ingrained in him, like muscle memory, the same way a professional architect enters a building and measures the solidity of its design. He examined the man's face—the way it was set, the widening of his eyes as he approached the beer—and what he carried in his basket: a half-gallon of milk and a bundle of twenty-five cent ramen noodles that did a lot to make you feel full without actually providing any nutrition, a feeling Nicholas knew well. He eyed the girl. Was she happy? It was hard to tell with children. Their smiles became frowns faster than the Grizzlies lost their first game.

Nicholas forced himself to pay attention to the wine. It was just a father and his daughter, nothing more. He decided to just buy the most expensive bottle the store had. High price meant high quality, right? He plucked it from the shelf and set off down the aisle, keeping his attention on his shoes—anywhere but at the construction worker. His soles squeaked against the checkered tile, forming a rapid one-note song that sounded far better than whatever pop song the store speakers were playing now that the Lovato song had ended.

He didn't notice the employee shift in front of him. A case of beer slammed into his gut, ripping away his breath and knocking the bottle from his hands. The case dropped. Glass shattered. Beer and wine splattered across white tile. The brand logo glistened amid snowy mountains; he recognized it. How could he not? It was seared into him like a cattle brand, as much a part of him as his own name. And the smell. Oh God, the smell. It was the bitter,

piss-water scent of cheap beer, and it blurred the sixteen-year divide between him and the trailer and the bathrobe and the scratch of her voice and his work boots and the mountains and the mountains and the mountains and the mountains—

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The cigarette smoke spiraled up from the couch, wisping against a discolored, splotchy patch on the trailer ceiling. Nicholas's mom sucked in again and the cherry flared like a devil's eye in the shadows. They didn't have a living room lamp, so the only light came from a small TV; it cast a blue glow over David's dirty work boots crossed on top of the coffee table, next to an ashtray and a row of empty beer cans.

Ashley's head pressed into Nicholas's shoulder. They sat on one couch while Mom and their stepfather sat on another. A football game droned on TV, but Ashley's eyes were glazed over and Nicholas didn't understand anything that was going on. There were so many rules—way too many for a ten-year-old. He wanted to ask questions but words were dangerous; the air felt charged, volatile, as if some kind of explosive gas had been pumped in and words had the potential to ignite it.

Mom leaned forward and dotted her cigarette out with two fingers, her nails painted a bright, neon pink. Nicholas eyed those nails, then decided to ask a question. Usually he could ask one without the room exploding. Ashley must've felt the words working their way to his mouth because she spoke.

“Don't,” she said, just loud enough for him to hear.

He scowled and shifted away from her. Ashley never wanted him to ask questions. His little sister was always the neutralizer, trying to please everyone—even Mom, if it kept the room from exploding.

“Why did that guy in stripes throw a red flag on the field?” he asked.

“If you wanna know so goddamn bad go look it up, Nic,” Mom said.

That wasn’t too bad. Better than ‘shut the fuck up.’

David cracked open another beer. The football game continued on TV. The second quarter stretched into the third, and then the fourth. Time stretched with the game, becoming slower and slower, until the little players didn’t seem to be moving at full speed. Nicholas badly wanted to go to sleep, but Mom hated movement more than she hated questions. “Where you think you’re going?” she would say when he tried to leave. Or “What, is this not good enough for you to watch?” Then she would get up and sway towards him, lipstick-smear mouth stretched to a clown-like snarl on her wrinkled face, those pink nails curled into a clenched fist high above his head.

The only time it was safe to move was when she fell asleep, or on the occasional night when David would whisper something in her ear and they'd retreat into the bedroom together. Those were good nights because he and Ashley got to watch *X-Men* and *Rugrats* reruns.

Mom stood from the couch. Nicholas tensed, but she stumbled away from him towards the hall, wrapping her frayed bathrobe around the rashes dotting her legs like moon craters. Although she liked drinking, his mom preferred other things—things that went in a pipe and made the bathroom smell funny. He hoped that she wasn’t going to the bathroom now, because afterwards, it was always worse.

Nicholas glanced at Ashley. Her eyes were closed. The couch muffled her snores, and her head was pressed against the couch arm in such a way that her blonde hair fanned out like a wildflower around her. This was their chance. He could wake her and they could sneak to their room.

“You wanna watch some cartoons?” David asked.

Nicholas turned to see his stepfather lifting a beer can to his bearded mouth. Snow-covered mountains glittered on the aluminum above a curly, cursive brand name. Nicholas hated that beer. He hated how it looked in the fridge beside the expired milk, like a big, exclusive castle the other food wasn't allowed to enter. He even hated the mountains. They were beautiful. Too beautiful.

David set down the beer can, empty, beside seven others, before picking up the remote and changing the channel to *The Ninja Turtles*. Any other time, Nicholas would have been happy to watch it, but they only had a few minutes until Mom came back—minutes that were dwindling with every passing second. He didn't know what to say to David, though. If he said 'yes' then he was stuck here, the opportunity to leave slammed shut by their stepfather's kindness. If he said 'no' then David might get mad. He never got as mad as Mom, but he did get loud. Loud meant yelling, and yelling would make Mom come back. And that would be bad. Very bad.

Reluctantly, he leaned back on the couch. Donatello and Raphael were beating up bad guys on a subway train. He tried to enjoy it, but his eyes kept darting towards the hallway, alert for any sign of Mom's return—the rustle of a bathrobe, the swish of slippers on carpet, a muted cough.

“Nic, you're a big boy now,” David said. “Why don't you try one of these?”

His stepfather held a can of beer out to him. It glistened between his meaty fingers, unopened, the edges dusted in ice from the cooler beside the couch. The forbidden castle. Nicholas stared at it, uncertain. Should he take it? Or not? This felt like a test, but one he hadn't been able to study for. At least on a multiple-choice test he could guess. Here, though, there were no bubbles to choose from. There may not even be a right answer.

"Go on," David said.

Nicholas took it. Its chill seared his palms, and it was heavier than he'd thought it would be. When he set it on his thigh, the mountains looked vast gripped by his small fingers—much bigger than his stepfather's. His seemed to engulf the snowy peaks.

He popped the tab and took a hesitant sip. It tasted terrible. Bitter and burning, like rotten soda. Face puckering, he managed to swallow it without throwing up. Barely. How did David and Mom drink so many?

"Keep drinking. You opened it, now finish it."

Gagging, Nicholas set it down on the coffee table. There was no way he could get through that whole can. He didn't even want to try.

"Nic," David said. "You aren't going to waste that."

Nicholas's eyes flickered to the hallway. If Mom came back and saw this, he would be in a lot of trouble. Big trouble. The kind that made Ashley crawl into his bed and wrap her arms around him later, when his head felt like splitting in half and moving became a unique kind of hell.

Keeping his eyes on the hallway, he reached for the can—and knocked it over. Amber liquid gushed over the wood, dripped down to the carpet, staining the tan a dark brown, almost black.

“Goddammit, Nic!” David said, jumping up from the couch. His stepfather hurried around the coffee table and disappeared into the hallway, then came back with a towel. He tossed it into Nicholas’s lap. “Clean it up.”

Nicholas dropped to the carpet, tears blurring his vision. He hadn’t meant to knock it over. He really hadn’t. It was an accident. With a shaking hand, he picked up the overturned can and wiped the coffee table dry. Any second now, Mom was going to turn the corner, screaming at him. *What the hell, Nic? You ruined the carpet! And why the fuck were you drinking?* Sniffing, he pressed the towel against the carpet, trying to soak up the spill.

David collapsed on the couch with a grunt. “That’s good enough. You can clean it better tomorrow.” He waved a hand at the hallway. “Go on to bed, since you can’t seem to handle your shit.”

Nicholas stopped wiping the floor, not believing his luck. That was it? He could just go to sleep? It was almost better that he’d spilled the beer; now he didn’t have to wait for Mom to come back. He and Ashley could go to their room. Avoid her, until tomorrow, when she hopefully wouldn’t be too angry. After wiping his tears away, he stood and shook Ashley’s shoulder. David’s yell hadn’t woken her somehow. “Hey, wake up. It’s time for bed.”

Ashley sat up, her eyes dazed.

“Not Ashley,” David said.

Nicholas looked at their stepfather, searching for a reason why Ashley had to stay behind. They always went to bed at the same time.

“Your mom’s asleep, so I need someone to keep me company.” David patted the seat next to him. Mom’s seat. “Come here, Ashley.”

Something twisted in Nicholas’s stomach, down at the very bottom, but he didn’t know why. It might’ve been because David never made them sit with him. He glanced at Ashley. Fight scenes from *The Ninja Turtles* flashed in her eyes, reflecting the indecision, the weariness. She didn’t want to do it.

“Ashley,” David said.

This time, authority spilled from the syllables, tugging at him, at Ashley. It was almost like a physical force. Like gravity. In science class today, his teacher had taught them about black holes, how they were so powerful they sucked things in and never let them go. Now, the way David sat shrouded in darkness, the way his words pulled. . .it made him think their stepfather was a black hole.

Ashley squeezed his hand, and smiled. It was a bright smile, bright as sunshine. But it was a gentle smile, too, like an autumn breeze, and it showcased both rows of her perfect teeth because the Tooth Fairy hadn’t come yet to take them. It was a smile that said, “Everything’s going to be okay.”

Nicholas almost believed it.

Ashly released his hand. She turned away and David’s gravity pulled her in until she hopped up next to him on the couch. Beside their stepfather, she looked dimmer, less radiant—but maybe that was just the light. As she sat there, a meaty hand—the same hand that

offered him the beer, the same hand that slid beneath Mom's robe when David thought they weren't looking—extended forward, as slow as a creaking door, and rested on Ashley's tiny knee. Engulfed it. Nicholas stood there for a second, straddling the line between the living room and the hallway, then David told him to go to his room.

So he did, and their stepfather lifting a beer can to his mouth was the last thing he saw before he turned the corner. The glint of snow-capped mountains bathed blue by the TV.

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Tears ran down Nicholas's face and fractured his vision into pieces, a kaleidoscope of skewed color: the beer, bleeding out onto the tile; his ears, buzzing with Rugrats laughter and hissing plastic tabs; the cooler, stretching down the aisle into forever, sneering packages of alcohol tinted blue-white under blinding spotlights, cigarette smoke curling up from the freezing corners.

The employee's face contorted but Nicholas didn't care. His mouth formed words but Nicholas wasn't listening. He stepped forward, bottles crunching under his feet, and seized a thirty-pack from the rack. Ice coated the packaging. Cooler. Mountains dusted in snow. Couch. As he hoisted it above his head the bottles clinked together like a cry for help. Someone put a hand on his shoulder but he pushed it away. Why should they be spared?

"Fuck you," he said.

He threw the beer against the tile. It exploded in a thunder-clap of shattering glass. Nicholas grabbed another and it broke the same way. He reached for a third thirty-pack, then a

fourth, then a fifth. When he ran out of thirty-packs, he switched to eighteen-packs, and when he ran out of those, he ripped six-packs from their flimsy shells and broke those too. He smashed pale ales and lagers, desert hills and palm-tree beach fronts, curly cursive names and simple blocky ones. He broke them until the aisle became a battlefield clogged with dead cardboard angels and golden blood gushed from their torn paper wings. He broke them until the acrid stench of fermented yeast made him gag and he couldn't see any faces in the mountains anymore. He broke them until there was nothing left to break.

And then he stopped.

He bent over, gasping. Something dripped from his face—beer or sweat or tears, he didn't know which. It might've been all of them, or none. He looked up and saw the construction worker, his daughter, and the employee all standing a few feet away, just outside the outer edge of the destruction, their faces pale. The little girl was crying.

"The police are on the way," the employee said.

Nicholas nodded. With a shaking hand, he fumbled in his back pocket and pulled out his wallet, then tossed it to the employee. "I'm going to go smoke a cigarette."

He picked his way through the mess, shoes squelching. As he passed the construction worker, the man shrank against the alcohol racks, pulling his daughter behind him. Nicholas faltered, his face burning. He wanted to apologize. He wanted to tell the man to be a good father. He wanted to tell the girl to never let anyone take away her smile. But instead he walked away, and all the words died, unspoken, in his mouth.

