

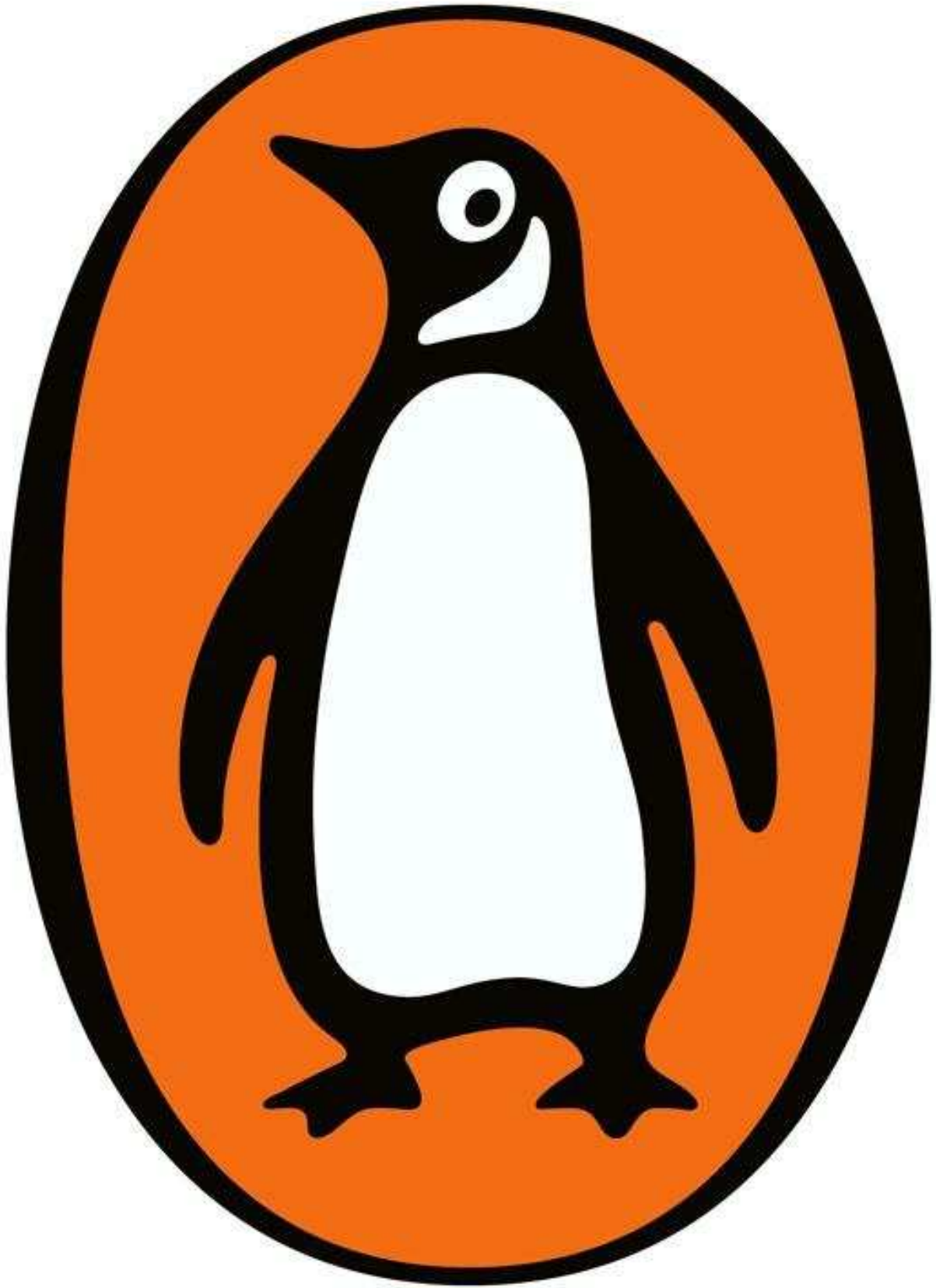


a
thousand
broken



INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Tillie Cole



About the Author

Tillie Cole hails from a small town in the North-East of England. When she is not writing, Tillie enjoys nothing more than spending time with her little family, curling up on her couch watching movies, drinking far too much coffee, and convincing herself that she really doesn't need that last square of chocolate.

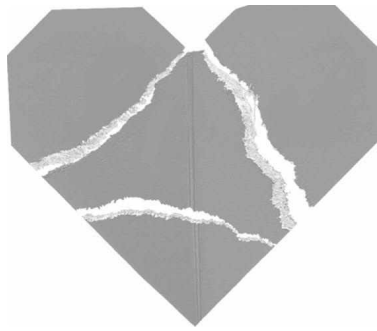
ALSO BY TILLIE COLE

A Thousand Boy Kisses

Tillie Cole

A THOUSAND BROKEN PIECES

A Novel



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

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

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

—POPPY, A THOUSAND BOY KISSES



Prologue

Savannah

Age thirteen

Blossom Grove, Georgia

I COULDN'T HEAR ANYTHING BUT THE DEAFENING BEATING OF MY HEART. Too fast in rhythm, thundering like the destructive summer storms that ripped through Georgia when the heat soared.

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

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

That this was *actually* happening.

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

"Savannah? Ida?" my mama said softly. I blinked through the watery haze until I saw my mama before us. I began to shake my head, my body seeming to jerk back to life from its numbed, catatonic state.

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

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

choked cry escaped my lips as I watched them.

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

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

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

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

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

As I took as deep a breath as I could, Ida and I rounded the bed. The first thing I heard was Poppy's breathing. It had changed. It was deep and rattly, and I could see the exhaustion, the struggle on her pretty face ...

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

Our Poppy ... the best person I had ever known.

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

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

"I love ... you too ... Ida," she replied, holding on to our younger sister like she would never let her go. Ida was Poppy's double in every way—her

personality, her looks, her always-positive outlook on life. Poppy's fingers ran through Ida's dark hair. "Never change," she murmured as Ida lifted her head. Poppy placed her weakening hand on Ida's cheek.

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

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

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

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

"No," I said, shaking my head. I felt a hand land on my back and an arm thread around my waist. I knew it was Mama and Ida keeping me upright. "I'm not ready ... I need you ... You're my older sister ... I need you, Poppy." My chest ached to the point of pain, and I knew it was my heart splintering into tiny fragmented pieces.

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

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

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

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

"I love you, Pops," I said. "You've been the best big sister I could ever ask

for.” Poppy swallowed and her eyes shimmered with tears. I studied her face. She was so close to leaving us. I memorized the green of her eyes, the natural streaks of warmth in her dark hair. She was pale now, but I held on to the memory of the peach tone of her soft skin. I held on to the memory of her sweet scent wrapping around me, to her face full of laughter and life.

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

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

I held my breath as, seconds later, he slowly reared back. And I watched it. I watched Rune’s face and saw in his shattered expression that she had gone. That Poppy had left us ...

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

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

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

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

On a stuttered breath, I rounded the bed. And I stilled. I stilled as I stared

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

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

I wasn't sure I ever could.



Lost Breaths and Moving Clouds

Savannah

Age seventeen

Blossom Grove, Georgia

THERE WERE PRECISELY FORTY-TWO CRACKS ON THE LINOLEUM FLOOR. Rob, the therapy leader, was talking, but all I heard was the tinny drone from the heating system whirring above us. My gaze was unfocused, catching only spears of daylight slicing through the high windows and the blurred outlines of the others in the circle around me.

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

Just like Poppy ...

I swallowed the instant lump that sprouted in my throat. It had been almost four years. Four long, excruciating years without her, and I still couldn’t think of her name or picture her pretty face without feeling my heart collapse on me like a mountain caving in. Without feeling the shadow of death’s unyielding fingers wrap around my lungs and starve them of air.

The knowing pangs of anxiety immediately began clawing their way up from the depths of where they slumbered. Sinking their teeth into my veins

and sending their poison flooding through my body until it had captured me as its unwilling hostage.

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

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

I was utterly exhausted.

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

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

A droplet of water landed on the back of my hand. I glanced down, only to catch another drop fall on my ring finger’s knuckle—they were coming from my cheeks. Exhaustion rippled over me, consuming all my strength. I couldn’t even lift my hands to wipe away the tears. So I focused on watching the journeying clouds again, wishing I could be like them, constantly moving, never having time to stop to process and think.

Thinking gave me space to break.

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

“Anxiety attack again?” Rob said. I nodded, my hair rubbing against the

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

I was simply broken.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No!"

"You've already finished high school. And you've gotten into Harvard.

Harvard, Savannah. That’s incredible.” Rob briefly paused to think but then added, “That’s Boston. Far, far away from here.”

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

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

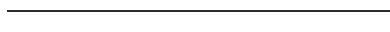
The one who would have changed the world.

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

“I know it might seem frightening. I know it’s something you might not believe you can do,” Rob said, his voice gentle and encouraging. “But you *can*, Savannah. I believe in you.” I felt my bottom lip tremble as I met his eyes. “I’m not giving up.” A gentle smile. “We’re going to get you through this. We’re going to get you to Harvard this fall. And you’re going to thrive.”

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

It looked exactly like a cello.



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

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

The white marble headstone shone like an angel in the lowering sun, dusk blanketing the grave in idyllic golden hues. POPPY LITCHFIELD stood out in golden writing, FOREVER ALWAYS etched underneath.

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

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

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

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

Rune.

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

and then bring home for Poppy to see.

“*So she won’t miss out on new adventures,*” he would tell me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I was still waiting for that day.

I watched the setting sun disappear through the trees, the waxing crescent

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

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

A travesty the world would forever be deprived of.