

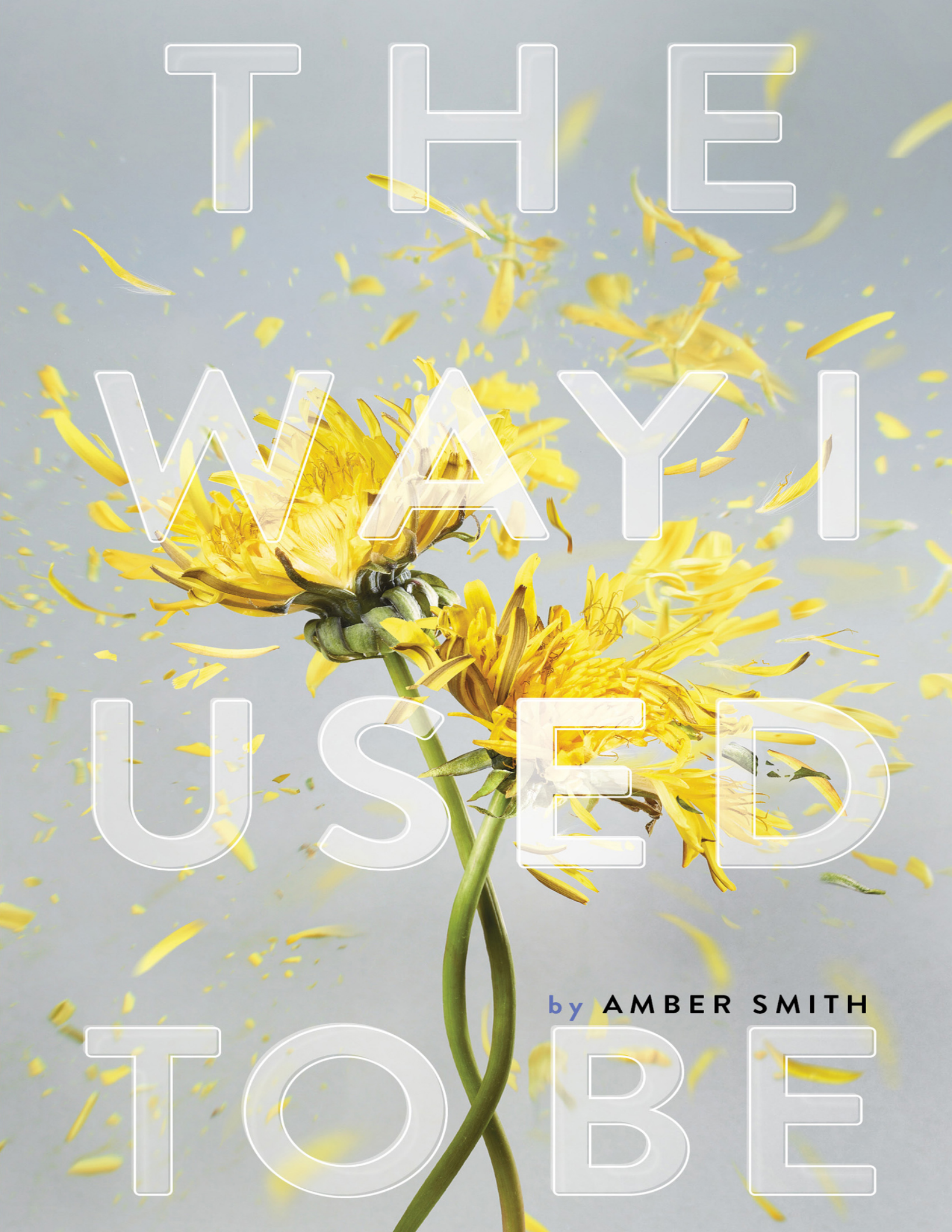
THE

WAY I

USED

TO BE

by AMBER SMITH



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THE

AMBER SMITH

WAY I

Margaret K. McElderry Books

USED

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

TO BE

To You.

To every *you* who has ever known the feeling of needing new ways to be.

PART

ONE

Freshman Year

I DON'T KNOW A LOT of things. I don't know why I didn't hear the door click shut. Why I didn't lock the damn door to begin with. Or why it didn't register that something was wrong—so mercilessly wrong—when I felt the mattress shift under his weight. Why I didn't scream when I opened my eyes and saw him crawling between my sheets. Or why I didn't try to fight him when I still stood a chance.

I don't know how long I lay there afterward, telling myself: Squeeze your eyelids shut, try, just try to forget. Try to ignore all the things that didn't feel right, all the things that felt like they would never feel right again. Ignore the taste in your mouth, the sticky dampness of the sheets, the fire radiating through your thighs, the nauseating pain—this bulletlike thing that ripped through you and got lodged in your gut somehow. No, can't cry. Because there's nothing to cry about. Because it was just a dream, a bad dream—a nightmare. Not real. Not real. Not real. That's what I keep thinking: *NotRealNotRealNotReal*. Repeat, repeat, repeat. Like a mantra. Like a prayer.

I don't know that these images flashing through my mind—a movie of someone else, somewhere else—will never really go away, will never ever stop playing, will never stop haunting me. I close my eyes again, but it's all I can see, all I can feel, all I can hear: his skin, his arms, his legs, his hands too strong, his breath on me, muscles stretching, bones cracking, body breaking, me getting weaker, fading. These things—it's all there is.

I don't know how many hours pass before I awake to the usual Sunday morning clamor—pots and pans clanging against the stove. Food smells seeping under my door—bacon, pancakes, Mom's coffee. TV sounds—cold fronts and storm systems moving through the area by midday—Dad's weather channel. Dishwasher-running sounds. Yippy yappy dog across the street yips and yaps at probably nothing, as always. And then there's the almost imperceptible rhythm of a basketball bouncing against the dewy blacktop and the squeaky-sneaker shuffling of feet in the driveway. Our stupid, sleepy suburbia, like every other stupid, sleepy suburbia, awakens groggy,

indifferent to its own inconsequence, collectively wishing for one more Saturday and dreading chores and church and to-do lists and Monday morning. Life just goes, just happens, continuing as always. Normal. And I can't shake the knowledge that life will just keep on happening, regardless if I wake up or not. Obscenely normal.

I don't know, as I force my eyes open, that the lies are already in motion. I try to swallow. But my throat's raw. Feels like strep, I tell myself. I must be sick, that's all. Must have a fever. I'm delirious. Not thinking clearly. I touch my lips. They sting. And my tongue tastes blood. But no, it couldn't have been. *Not real*. So as I stare at the ceiling, I'm thinking: I must have serious issues if I'm dreaming stuff like that. Horrible stuff like that. About Kevin. Kevin. Because Kevin is my brother's best friend, practically my brother. My parents love him like everyone does, even me, and Kevin would never—could never. Not possible. But then I try to move my legs to stand. They're so sore—no, broken feeling. And my jaw aches like a mouthful of cavities.

I close my eyes again. Take a deep breath. Reach down and touch my body. No underwear. I sit up too fast and my bones wail like I'm an old person. I'm scared to look. But there they are: my days-of-the-week underwear in a ball on the floor. They were my Tuesdays, even though it was Saturday, because, well, who would ever know anyway? That's what I was thinking when I put them on yesterday. And now I know, for sure, it happened. It actually happened. And this pain in the center of my body, the depths of my insides, restarts its torture as if on cue. I throw the covers off. Kneecap-shaped bruises line my arms, my hips, my thighs. And the blood—on the sheets, the comforter, my legs.

But this was supposed to be an ordinary Sunday.

I was supposed to get up, get dressed, and sit down to breakfast with my family. Then after breakfast, I would promptly go to my bedroom and finish any homework I hadn't finished Friday night, sure to pay special attention to geometry. I would practice that new song we learned in band, call my best friend, Mara, maybe go to her house later, and do dozens of other stupid, meaningless tasks.

But that's not what's going to happen today, I know, as I sit in my bed, staring at my stained skin in disbelief, my hand shaking as I press it against my mouth.

Two knocks on my bedroom door. I jump.

“Edy, you up?” My mother’s voice shouts. I open my mouth, but it feels like someone poured hydrochloric acid down my throat and I might never be able to speak again. Knock, knock, knock: “Eden, breakfast!” I quickly pull my nightgown down as far as it will go, but there’s blood smeared on that, too.

“Mom?” I finally call back, my voice scratchy and horrible.

She cracks the door open. As she peers in her eyes immediately go to the blood. “Oh God,” she gasps, as she slips inside and quickly shuts the door behind her.

“Mom, I—” But how am I supposed say the words, the worst words, the ones I know have to be spoken?

“Oh, Edy.” She sighs, turning her head at me with a sad smile. “It’s okay.”

“Wh—” I start to say. How can it be okay, in what world is this okay?

“This happens sometimes when you’re not expecting it.” She flits around my room, tidying up, barely looking at me while she explains about periods and calendars and counting the days. “It happens to everyone. That’s why I told you, you need to keep track. That way you won’t have to deal with these . . . surprises. You can be . . . prepared.”

This is what she thinks this is.

Now, I’ve seen enough TV movies to know you’re supposed to tell. You’re just supposed to fucking tell. “But—”

“Why don’t you hop in the shower, sweetie?” she interrupts. “I’ll take care of this . . . uh . . . ,” she begins, gesturing with her arm in a wide circle over my bed, searching for the word, “this mess.”

This mess. Oh God, it’s now or never. Now or never. It’s now. “Mom—” I try again.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” she says with a laugh. “It’s fine, really, I promise.” She stands over me, looking taller than she ever has before, handing me my robe, oblivious of my Tuesday underwear crumpled at her feet.

“Mom, Kevin—” I start, but his name in my mouth makes me want to throw up.

“Don’t worry, Edy. He’s out back with your brother. They’re playing basketball. And your father’s glued to the TV, as usual. Nobody’ll see you. Go ahead. Put this on.”

Looking up at her, I feel so small. And Kevin’s voice moves like a tornado through my mind, whispering—his breath on my face—*No one will ever believe you. You*

know that. No one. Not ever.

Then my mom shakes the robe at me, offering me a lie I didn't even need to think up. She starts getting that look in her eye—that impatient, it's-the-holidays-and-I-don't-have-time-for-this look. Clearly, it was time for me to get going so she could deal with this mess. And clearly, nobody was going to hear me. Nobody was going to see me—he knew that. He had been around long enough to know how things work here.

I try to stand without looking like everything is broken. I kick the Tuesdays under the bed so she won't find them and wonder. I take my robe. Take the lie. And as I look back at my mother, watching her collect the soiled sheets in her arms—the evidence—I know somehow if it's not now, it has to be never. Because he was right, no one would ever believe me. Of course they wouldn't. Not ever.

In the bathroom, I carefully peel off my nightgown, holding it at arm's length as I ball it up and stuff it in the garbage can under the sink. I adjust my glasses and examine myself more closely. There are a few faint marks on my throat in the shape of his fingers. But they're minor, really, in comparison to the ones on my body. No bruises on my face. Only the two-inch scar above my left eye from my bike accident two summers ago. My hair is slightly more disastrous than usual, but essentially I look the same—I can pass.

By the time I get out of the shower—still dirty, after scrubbing my body raw, thinking I could maybe wash the bruises off—there he is. Sitting at my kitchen table in my dining room with my brother, my father, my mother, sipping my orange juice from my glass—his mouth on a glass I would have to use someday. On a fork that would soon be undifferentiated from all the other forks. His fingerprints not only all over every inch of me, but all over everything: this house, my life, the world—infected with him.

Caelin raises his head and narrows his eyes at me as I cautiously approach the dining room. He can see it. I knew he would see it right away. If anyone was going to notice—if I could count on anyone—it would be my big brother. “Okay, you're being

really weird and intense right now,” he announces. He could tell because he always knew me even better than I knew myself.

So I stand there and wait for him to do something about this. For him to set his fork down, stand up and pull me aside, take me out to the backyard by the arm, and demand to know what’s wrong with me, demand to know what happened. Then I’d tell him what Kevin did to me and he’d give me one of his big brother-isms, like, *Don’t worry, Edy, I’ll take care of it.* The way he did whenever anyone was picking on me. And then he’d run back inside the house and stab Kevin to death with his own butter knife.

But that’s not what happens.

What happens is he just sits there. Watching me. Then slowly his mouth contorts into one of his smirks—our inside-joke grin—waiting for me to reciprocate, to give him a sign, or just start laughing like maybe I’m trying to secretly make fun of our parents. He’s waiting to get it. But he doesn’t get it. So he just shrugs, looks back down at his plate, and lops off a big slice of pancake. The bullet lodges itself a little deeper in my stomach as I stand there, frozen in the hallway.

“Seriously, what are you staring at?” he mumbles with his mouth full of pancake, in that familiar brotherly, you’re-the-stupidest-person-on-the-face-of-the-earth tone he had perfected over the years.

Meanwhile, Kevin barely even glances up. No threatening looks. No gestures of warning, nothing. As if nothing had even happened. The same cool disregard he always used with me. Like I’m still just Caelin’s dorky little sister with bad hair and freckles, freshman band-geek nobody, tagging along behind them, clarinet case in tow. But I’m not her anymore. I don’t even want to be her anymore. That girl who was so naive and stupid—the kind of girl who could let something like this happen to her.

“Come on, Minnie,” Dad says to me, using my pet name. Minnie as in Mouse, because I was so quiet. He gestured at the food on the table. “Sit down. Everything’s getting cold.”

As I stand in front of them—their Mousegirl—crooked glasses sliding down the bridge of my nose, stripped before eight scrutinizing eyes waiting for me to play my part, I finally realize what it’s all been about. The previous fourteen years had merely

been dress rehearsal, preparation for knowing how to properly shut up now. And Kevin had told me, with his lips almost touching mine he whispered the words: *You're gonna keep your mouth shut*. Last night it was an order, a command, but today it's just the truth.

I push my glasses up. And with a sickness in my stomach—something like stage fright—I move slowly, cautiously. Try to act like every part of my body, inside and out, isn't throbbing and pulsing. I sit down in the seat next to Kevin like I had at countless family meals. Because we considered him part of our family, Mom was always saying it, over and over. He was always welcome. Always.

IT'S TOTALLY SILENT IN the house after breakfast. Caelin left with Kevin to go play basketball with some of their old teammates from high school. Dad needed some kind of special wrench from the hardware store to install the new showerhead he got Mom for Christmas. And Mom was in her room, busy addressing New Year's cards.

I sit in the living room, staring out the window.

A row of multicolored Christmas lights lining the garage flicker spastically in the gray morning light. The clouds pile one on top of the other endlessly, the sky closing in on us. Next door, a mostly deflated giant Santa rocks back and forth in the center of our neighbors' white lawn with a slow, sick, zombielike shuffle. It feels like that scene in *The Wizard of Oz* when everything changes from black and white to color. Except it's more like the other way around. Like I always thought things were in color, but they were really black and white. I can see that now.

"You feeling all right, Edy?" Mom suddenly appears in the room carrying a stack of envelopes in her hands.

I shrug in response, but I don't think she even notices.

I watch a car roll through the stop sign at the corner, the driver barely glancing up to see if anyone's there. I think about how they say when most people get into car accidents, it's less than one mile from their home. Maybe that's because everything's so familiar, you stop paying attention. You don't notice the one thing that's different or wrong or off or dangerous. And I think about how maybe that's what just happened to me.

"You know what I think?" she asks in that tone she's been using on me ever since Caelin left for school over the summer. "I think you're mad at your brother because he hasn't spent enough time with you while he's been home." She doesn't wait for me to tell her she's wrong before she keeps talking. To tell her that it's really her who's mad that he hasn't been home enough. "I know you want it to be just the two of you. Like it used to be. But he's getting older—you're both getting older—he's in college now, Edy."

“I know that—” I start to say, but she interrupts.

“It’s okay that he wants to see his friends while he’s home, you know.”

The truth is, none of us knows how to act around one another without Caelin here. It’s like we’ve become strangers all of a sudden. Caelin was the glue. He gave us purpose—a reason, a way to be together. Because what are we supposed to do with each other if we’re not cheering him on at his basketball games anymore? What are our kitchen table conversations supposed to sound like without him regaling us with his daily activities? I’m certainly no substitute; everyone knows that. What the hell do I have going on that could ever compare to the nonstop larger-than-life excitement that is Caelin McCrorey? At first I thought we were adjusting. But this is just how we are. Dad’s lost without another guy around. Mom doesn’t know what to do with herself without Caelin taking up all her time and attention. And me, I just need my best friend back. It’s simple, yet so complicated.

“It wouldn’t hurt you to branch out a bit either,” she continues, shuffling the stack of envelopes in her hands. “Make a couple of new friends. It’s officially the new year.” She smiles. I don’t. “Edy, you know I think Mara’s great—she’s been a great friend to you—but a person is allowed more than one friend in life is all I’m saying.”

I stand and walk past her into the kitchen. I pour myself a glass of water, just so I have something, anything, to focus on other than my mom, the pointlessness of this conversation, and the endless train wreck of thoughts crashing through my mind.

She stands next to me at the kitchen counter. I can feel her staring at the side of my face. It makes me want to crawl out of my skin. She reaches out to tuck my bangs behind my ear, like she always does. But I back away. Not on purpose. Or maybe it is. I’m not sure. I know I’ve hurt her feelings. I open my mouth to tell her I’m sorry, but what comes out instead is: “It’s too hot here. I’m going outside.”

“Oh-kay,” she says slowly, confused.

My feet quickly move away from her. I grab my coat off the hook near the back door, slide my boots on, and walk out to the backyard. I brush the snow off one of the wooden swing-set seats. I feel the bruises on my body swell against the cold wood and metal chains. I just want to sit still for a second, breathe, and try to figure out how things could have ever gotten to this point. Figure out what I’m supposed to do now.

I close my eyes tight, weave my fingers together—and though I know I don't do it nearly as much as I probably should—I pray, pray harder than I've ever prayed in my life. To somehow undo this. To just wake up, and have it be this morning again, except this time nothing would have happened last night.

I remember sitting down at the table with him. We played Monopoly. It was nothing, though. Nothing seemed wrong. He was actually being nice to me. Acting like . . . he liked me. Acting like I was more than just Caelin's little sister. Like I was a real person. A girl, not just a kid. I went to bed happy. I went to bed thinking of him. But the next thing I remember is waking up to him climbing on top of me, putting his hand over my mouth, whispering *shutupshutupshutup*. And everything happening so fast. If it could all be a dream, just a dream that I could wake up from, then I would still be safe in my bed. That would make so much more sense. And nothing will be wrong. Nothing will be different. I'll just be in my bed and nothing bad will ever have to happen there.

“Wake up,” I think I whisper out loud. God, just wake up. Wake up, Edy!

“Eden!” a voice calls.

My eyes snap open. My heart sinks into the pit of my stomach as I look around. Because I'm not in my bed. I'm in the backyard sitting on the swing, my bare fingers numb, curled tightly around the metal chains.

“What are you doing, splitting atoms over there?” my brother shouts from the back door. “I've been standing here calling your name a hundred times.”

He walks toward me, his steps are wide and swift and sure, the fresh snow crushing easily under his feet. I sit up straighter, put my hands in my lap, and try not to give away anything that would let him know how wrong my body feels to me right now.

“So, Edy,” Caelin begins, sitting down on the swing next to mine. “I hear you're mad at me.”

I try to smile, try to do my best impression of myself. “Let me guess who told you that.”

“She said it's because I'm not spending enough time with you?” His half grin tells me he half believes her.

“No, that's not it.”

“Okay, well, you’re acting way weird.” He elbows me in the arm and adds with a smile, “Even for you.”

Maybe this is my chance. Would Kevin really kill me if I told—could he really kill me? He could. He made sure I knew he could if he wanted to. But he’s not here right now. Caelin is here. To protect me, to be on my side.

“Caelin, please don’t leave tomorrow,” I blurt out, feeling a sudden urgency take hold of me. “Don’t go back to school. Just don’t leave me, okay? Please,” I beg him, tears almost ready to spill over.

“What?” he asks, almost a laugh in his voice. “Where is this coming from? I have to go back, Edy—I don’t have a choice. You know that.”

“Yes, you do, you have a choice. You could go to school here—you had that scholarship to go here, remember?”

“But I didn’t take it.” He pauses, looking at me, uncertain. “Look, I don’t know what you want me to say here. Are you serious?”

“I just don’t want you to go.”

“All right, just for fun let’s say I stay. Okay? But think about it, what am I supposed to do about school? I’m right in the middle of the year. All my stuff is there. My girlfriend is there. My life is there now, Edy. I can’t just drop everything and move back home so we can hang out, or whatever.”

“That’s not what I mean. Don’t talk to me like I’m a kid,” I tell him quietly.

“Hate to break it to you, but you are a kid, Edy.” He smiles, clapping my shoulder. “Besides, what’s Kevin supposed to do? We’re roommates. We share a car. We share bills—everything. We’re kind of depending on each other right now, Edy. Grown-up stuff. You know?”

“I depend on you too—I need you.”

“Since when?” he says with a laugh.

“It’s not funny. You’re *my* brother, not Kevin’s,” I almost shout, my voice trembling.

“All right, all right.” He rolls his eyes. “Apparently you gave up having a sense of humor for your New Year’s resolution,” he says, standing up like the conversation is over just because he’s said what he wanted to say. “Come on, let’s go inside.” He holds out his hand to me. I feel my feet plant themselves firmly in the snow. My legs begin to follow him instinctually, as they always have. My hand rises toward his. But then

just as my fingers are about to touch his palm, something snaps inside of me. Physically snaps. If my body were a machine, it's like the gears inside of me just grind to a halt, my muscles short-circuit and forbid my body to move.

"No." I say firmly, my voice someone else's.

He just stands there looking down at me. Confused because I've never said no to him before in my entire life. He shifts from one foot to the other and turns his head ever so slightly, like a dog. He exhales a puff of air through his smiling lips and opens his mouth. But I can't let him say whatever smart-ass remark his mind is churning out.

"You don't get it!" I would have yelled the words if my teeth weren't clenched.

"Get what?" he asks, his voice an octave too high, looking around us like there's someone else here who's supposed to be filling him in.

"You're my brother." I feel the words collapsing in my throat like an avalanche. "Not Kevin's!"

"What's your problem? I know that!"

I stand up, can't let him try to get away before he knows the truth. Before I tell him what happened. "If you know that, then why is he always here? Why do you keep bringing him with you? He has his own family!" My voice falters, and I can't stop the tears from falling.

"You've never had a problem with him being around before. In fact, it's almost like the opposite." The sentence hangs in the air like an echo. I look up at him. Even blurry through my tears I can tell he's mad.

"What do you mean"—I shudder—"the opposite?"

"I mean, maybe it's time to drop the whole little schoolgirl-crush thing. It was cute for a while, Edy—funny, even—but it's played itself out, don't you think? It's obviously making you, I don't know, mean, or something. You're not acting like yourself." And then he adds, more to himself, "You know, I guess I should've seen this coming. It's so funny because me and Kevin were just talking about this."

"What?" I breathe, barely able to give the word any volume. I can't believe it. I cannot believe he's really done it. He's managed to turn my brother—my true best friend, my ally—against me.

“Forget it,” he snaps, throwing his hands up as he walks away from me. And I can only watch him get smaller, watch him fade from color to black and white, like everything else. I stand there for a while, trying to figure out how to follow, how to move—how to exist in a world where Caelin is no longer on my side.

That night I close my bedroom door gently. I turn the lock ninety degrees to the right and pull on the knob as hard as I can, just to make sure. Then I turn around and look at my bed, the sheets and comforter clean and perfectly made up. I don't know how I can possibly go even one more minute without telling someone what happened. I take my phone out of my pocket and start to call Mara. But I stop.

I turn on the ceiling light and my desk lamp, and then pull out my sleeping bag from the top shelf of my closet. I roll it out onto the floor, and try to think of anything but the reason why I cannot bring myself to sleep in my bed. I lie down, half falling, half collapsing, onto my bedroom floor. I pull my pillow over my head and I cry so hard I don't know how I'll ever stop. I cry for what feels like days. I cry until there are no more tears, like I have used them all up, like maybe I have broken my damn tear ducts. Then I just make the sounds: the gasping and sniffing. I feel like I might just fall asleep and not wake up—in fact, I almost hope I do.

IF THERE'S A HELL, it must look a lot like a high school cafeteria. It's the first day back from winter break. And I'm trying so hard to just go back to my life. The way it used to be. The way I used to be.

I exit the lunch line and scan the cafeteria for Mara. Finally I spot her, waving her arm over her head from across the crowded, rumbling cafeteria. She was able to secure us a spot in the drafty corner near the windows. Every step I take is intercepted by someone walking in front of me, someone shouting, trying to be heard over the noise but only adding to the disorder of everything.

"Hey!" Mara calls to me as I approach. "Stephen got here early and saved us this table." She's smiling hugely, which she's been doing all day, ever since she got her braces off last week.

"Cool," I manage. I knew scoring this table was like hitting the jackpot. We would be inconspicuous, not as much of a target as usual. But I can only give Stephen a small smile.

Stephen Reinheiser, aka Fat Kid, is a nice, quiet boy we know from yearbook who occasionally sits with us at lunch. Not really a friend. An acquaintance. He is a different breed of nerd than me and Mara. We are club-joining, band-type nerds. But he just doesn't fit in, really, anywhere. It doesn't matter though, because there is a silent understanding among us. We have known him since middle school. We know his mother died when we were in seventh grade. We know his experience has been just as tragic as ours, if not more. So we look out for each other. Meaning, if one of us can snag a decent lunch table, it belongs to us all and we don't have to talk about why this is important.

"Edy?" Stephen begins in his usual hesitant manner. "Um, I was wondering if you wanted to work together on the history project for Simmons's class?"

"What project?"

"The one he talked about this morning. You know, he handed out that list of topic ideas," he reminds me. But I have no recollection of this at all. It must show because

Stephen opens his binder, smiling as he pulls out a sheet of paper and slides it across the table. “I was thinking ‘Columbus: Hero or Villain?’”

I look at the paper for what I’m sure is the first time. “Oh. Okay. Yeah. That sounds good. Columbus.”

Mara takes out her compact mirror and examines her new teeth for the millionth time, obsessively running her tongue over their smooth surfaces. “God, is this what everyone’s teeth feel like?” she asks absently.

But before either of us can answer, a whole fleet of corn kernel pellets shoot down over our table. Mara screams, “Ew, God!” As she shakes her hair the little yellow balls tumble to the floor one by one. I follow the path of the ammo, leading to this table full of sophomore guys, each one in his pathetic JV jacket, keeled over in their chairs laughing hysterically at Mara as she frantically combs her long hair with her fingers. I hear her voice, almost like an echo in my brain, “Did I get it all?” I look at her, but it seems like it’s all happening at a distance, in slow motion. Stephen sets his bologna sandwich down on top of its plastic baggie and clears his throat like he’s about to do something. But then he just looks down instead, like he’s concentrating so hard on the damn sandwich, there’s no room to think about anything else.

“Fire in the hole!” I hear someone shout.

My head snaps up just in time to see one of them—the one with the stupid grin and pimply face—line up his sight, the cheap, malleable metal spoon poised to launch a spoonful of pale green peas right at me. His index finger pulls back on the tip of the spoon slightly.

And some kind of hot, white light flashes in front of my eyes, harnessing itself to my heart, making it beat uncontrollably. I’m up from my seat before I even understand how my body moved so quickly without my brain. Zitface narrows his eyes at me, his smile widening as his tablemates cheer him on. His finger releases like a trigger. The spoonful of peas hit me square in the chest and then drop to the floor with these tiny, dull, flat thuds that I swear I can hear over all the other noise.

Suddenly the planet stops orbiting, pauses, and goes silent for just a moment while all the eyes in the world focus on me standing there with mushy pea splat on the front of my shirt. Then time rushes forward again, the moment over. And cacophony erupts in the cafeteria. The Earth resumes its rotation around the sun. The

sounds of the entire cafeteria's oooohhhhs and shouting and laughter flood my body. My brain overheats. And I run, I just go.

I'm aware of Mara watching me storm out of the cafeteria, her palms facing up toward the mind-numbing fluorescent lights, mouthing, *What are you doing?* Aware of Stephen looking back and forth between me, Mara, and his bologna sandwich, his mouth hanging open. But I can't stop. Can't turn around. Can't go back there. Ever. Without a hall pass, without permission, without a coherent thought in my head except *Get the hell out*, I get the hell out.

In the hall I walk fast. I can barely breathe, something strangling me from the inside out. On autopilot, my feet race down the hall and up the stairs, looking for a place—any place—to just be. I shove through the double doors of the library and it's like I've just walked outside. Things are somehow lighter here, and everything moves at a more normal pace, slowing my heart down along with them as I stand in the entryway. There are only a few kids scattered throughout the entire library. No one even looks up at me.

The door behind the circulation desk opens and Miss Sullivan walks through cradling a stack of books in her arms. She smiles at me so warmly. "Hello. What can I do for you?" she asks, setting the books down on the counter.

Hide me, I want to tell her. Just hide me from the world. And never make me go back out through those doors again. But I don't. I don't say anything. I can't.

"Come on in," she gestures me forward. "Here's the sign-in sheet," she tells me, centering a clipboard in front of me.

I take the pen tied to a string tied to the top of the clipboard. It feels like a chopstick between my fingers, my hand shaking as I press the pen against the paper. You're supposed to fill in the date, your name, the time, and where you're coming from. We have to do this every time we come or go anywhere.

Miss Sullivan looks at the scribble that's supposed to be my name. "And what's your name again?" she asks gently.

"Eden," I answer, my voice low.

"Eden, okay. And where are you coming from?" I've left that box blank.

I open my mouth but nothing comes out at first. She looks up at me with another smile.