

Prologue

My mom looked back at me and smiled, the sun casting a golden haze of light around her features. She didn't need the sun seeping through the windshield to make her look as if she was glowing and radiant though. That's how I always saw my mother, with a permanent glowing radiance.

I shared a secret smile with her, one that suggested we could read each other's thoughts and had no need to exchange words verbally. We probably could read each other's mind if we really tried. That was just the kind of relationship we shared.

Her eyes danced when they met mine, and I knew she could guess what I was thinking. Of course I was daydreaming about Nicky, as I had been for the last five hours. The drive to New York would still last at least another two hours more, but I could care less about the length of our trip. With the battery on my I-pod half-charged and a new playlist synced in just the night before, which happened to be a compilation of songs someone dedicated specifically to me, I could sit in the car for at least two more days and still be content. My newly made memories and endless daydreams would keep me company while I listened to the soundtrack of my life.

I hadn't completely lost myself in thought again when I felt my dad eyeing me in the rearview mirror. Turning down the volume, I smiled sheepishly at him. He too could probably guess what I was thinking. Anyone who knew me at all would undoubtedly know.

For a dad, mine handled the knowledge of my obsessive teenage love pretty well. I winked at him to let him know that he was still number one in my life as far as men were concerned, justifying in my heart that Nicky was seventeen anyways, so he technically didn't count as a man just yet. He was close, and when the time came, it would be a tough call. For now

though, I tried to let my dad know he still held first place. He had, after all, loved me unconditionally for sixteen years now.

Nicky had some catching up to do.

I wondered for the umpteenth time if my full-fledged romance with him had anything to do with my parents' agreement to let me spend the summer in New York with my aunt. I had barely spent a weekend apart from them in the past, let alone an entire summer. But after very little pleading on my part and only a minimal amount of convincing on my aunt's, they had readily agreed to let me spend the summer several states away from them. While they had also readily agreed to a courtship between Nicky and I, I guessed that my father was pleased I would be putting miles upon miles of distance between us. Since Nick also happened to be my next-door-neighbor, I was sure our close proximity added stress on my parents. At the same time, this fact had also worked out in our favor when we'd first started dating, because my parents had known Nick from the time he was born, almost two years full years before my own birth. They had watched him grow up and become the respectable young man he was now, which definitely worked in my favor as far as our relationship was concerned.

I knew I was biased in regards to my boyfriend's character, but Nicholas Adams came from a good family and had always maintained a strong sense of morality. He was above par as far as teenage boys were concerned, and I was happy that I had finally convinced him to be mine. I suspected my parents were grateful as well, and honestly, I didn't know who in their right minds could disapprove of having Nick as their daughter's suitor.

With my ever present thoughts of Nick playing in my mind, I reached down to pull my cell phone from the bag at my feet so I could check the reception for the thirtieth time that hour. We were continuously driving in and out of bad service areas, meaning I hadn't been unable to

send or receive text messages for quite some time. At the moment, we were passing through a long, wooded strip of highway that wound around country hills, which was not optimal condition for cell phone usage. The screen was still devoid of bars when I pressed the unlock key, and after I bent down to return the pink-studded device into my bag, I told myself I wouldn't check my phone again until we were past the wooded area for good.

I sat back up in my seat and my gaze returned absently to the windshield in front of me. A slight movement near the side of the road caught my eye, and I glanced over towards the window beside my mother, not quite sure what to expect. I saw a beautiful deer leap gracefully into the middle of the road, only a few feet away from our sleek sedan. For a few moments, a fleeting thrill of excitement rushed through me at the sight of the beautiful creature. Its tall, lean frame was poised for flight, but as we sped perilously closer, the deer held its ground. I kept waiting for it to leap back out of the way, wondering why the approaching speed of our car hadn't scared the animal away yet. The deer didn't so much as flinch, and as I watched in confused stupor, I felt the tires skid across the road as my dad slammed his foot against the brake pedal.

My brain suddenly registered that the deer wasn't going to move, and my dad must have realized this as well because I felt the car swerve to miss the animal. From the instant my eyes focused on the deer and I realized that it posed a great threat, only seconds had transpired; but every moment that passed by afterwards felt like a lifetime. My brain couldn't register how quickly imminent danger had presented itself on our otherwise uneventful car ride. The logistics of the deer gliding stealthily out of the woods and stopping directly in our path seemed incomprehensible. Yet, I still knew the threat was real, and I still felt the first signs of sickening fear clutch me.

The car wreck seemed to happen in slow motion. I remained silent the entire time, unable to move an inch or even breathe in enough air to fill my lungs. I didn't know how my mom was reacting to the sight before us, or how my father was planning on taking control of the situation. I was completely oblivious of what was going on inside of the car. My eyes were transfixed on the deer in the middle of the road, inches away from our steel grey car.

I felt the car slide off the road as the tires lost their grip on the pavement. My body jerked to the right side of the car, and I heard nothing but a deafening silence; I felt nothing but a strangling fear. I was paralyzed, my body rigid, tense and unmoving in the back seat of the car. The wooded areas blurred around us until I couldn't make out a single shape outside of the vehicle. Somewhere in my mind, I registered that the trees were still there; looming objects that would restrain our churning vehicle at any instant. I waited for the impact. I knew the collision would come, and the expectancy gripped me with a blinding fear, tearing through my insides, causing my heart to stop beating within my chest.

I wished afterwards that I could say I saw things clearly in those moments; that I saw an otherworldly ray of light beckoning me towards safety. But my life didn't flash before my eyes, and I had no life-changing visions either.

All I could concentrate on was my fear. It was more tangible than any other object I had ever physically touched before that moment. It hung in the air, threatening to choke the oxygen from my lungs. It left a bitter taste in my mouth and caused a God-awful ringing in my ears unlike any sound I had ever heard before in my life.

I prayed for it to stop.

I willed the spinning to end and the colors to quit blurring around me. After what felt like an eternity of heart-pounding seconds, the car finally stopped rotating in dizzying circles. When

at last the sedan came into contact with an object large enough to stop its ricocheting path, my head slammed into the window and I saw nothing but white light. I blinked against the pain, feeling as if my skull had cracked in half. I couldn't see. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't cry out in pain or fear or shock. I could just sit there and wait and hope that the light would stop blinding me.

When the pounding in my head became too much to bear, I stopped trying to hold on altogether. It no longer mattered if I was able to gasp in breaths of air or not. My head pounded so much that the constriction in my lungs actually became a welcome escape from the pain. I allowed my eyes to drift shut again, if they were ever even open to begin with, and I gave into defeat. Black nothingness enveloped me, and I slipped further and further into the darkness, entering my own private abyss.