

Through the Valley

by

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A creative project submitted to

Sonoma State University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

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May 8, 2020

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ABSTRACT

My intent with *Through the Valley* was, in part, to provide representation in a genre I so rarely find for myself and for others who fall into similar identities as myself in terms of gender and sexuality. Historical fiction has always been a genre I have been passionate about and it was my goal to imbue the historical setting I've chosen to work within with themes that can still be felt in the present day such as a search for one's identity, the impact of war on those who fight it, the lengths people will go as a result of fervent patriotism. Having grown up in a period of conflict I find it cathartic in some ways to write what might be qualified as war literature in spite of the fact I myself have never experienced military service. I sincerely hope that my characters will read as real people with real struggles that the reader can connect and empathize with in spite of any inherent differences between themselves and the characters on the page. If I can provide a glimpse of representation for even one person who reads my thesis, I will have achieved the goal I set for myself as I crafted it.

MA Program: English
Sonoma State University
2020

Date: May 8,

Table of Contents

| | |
|--------------------|----|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Works Cited | 13 |
| Chapter One | 14 |
| Chapter Two..... | 40 |
| Chapter Three..... | 64 |

Introduction of Project

As a child I was fascinated by stories of war— by tales of the forgotten generation that fought in the first world war and the greatest generation that fought the second; my grandparents, having been born either at the beginning or shortly after the war had endless stories to tell from their own parents’ experiences and I devoured them with an eagerness that belied the fact I was still much too young to understand their implications. I began writing in earnest when I was eleven or twelve years old, scrawling pieces inspired by the media I was consuming and sharing them eagerly with anyone who cared to listen for more than even the most fleeting moment. By the time I reached high school my writing was already evolving to a point that I was becoming increasingly proud of and it was during high school that the personal project that would eventually evolve into my work in the graduate program was born. I read countless war memoirs throughout high school and found myself enthralled by the various reasons various men had for being willing to throw their lives into the defense of a country they held dear to their hearts. Perhaps it was the fact that I’d grown up in a post-911 United States but the ideas of patriotism and fighting for just causes and personal belief were ideas I found myself eager to explore in my writing. Initially, this project was simply a collection of ideas— it went through various phases and iterations, at one point a story of prisoners of war in which my featured protagonist was a young man; at another an exploration of character in providing the onset of World War II through the eyes of a boy unfit to serve.

It was during this particular iteration that I found myself returning to the media that had inspired me as a teenager: the film *Saving Private Ryan* and the miniseries’ *The Pacific* and *Band of Brothers*. All three exemplified the themes and ideas I longed to

explore in my writing but when I tried to replicate them in my own work, though I was proud of the finished product, my heart was never in it. Over the course of my undergraduate career I began to realize that the media I was consuming where war was concerned never reflected anything I could relate to in terms of both gender and sexuality. It was an understandable gap in historical fiction and in particular fiction that dealt with the period encompassed by World War II— women weren't permitted to join the war in a combat capacity and any outward expression of sexuality of nearly any form was derided and looked down upon.

Those notions eventually inspired me to write *Through the Valley*, an exploration of one young woman subverting gender roles in order to fulfill a desire to fight for a country unwilling to acknowledge her and the ways in which her love for one girl keep her going through it all. It is the fact that fiction is the medium in which I am able to write that I felt comfortable enough to make an earnest attempt at writing a piece of fiction that I feel passionate about. A piece of fiction that explores struggles with identity, themes of acceptance and fighting for causes one believes in so strongly there is little else to do but champion them to one's last breath. It is my fondest hope that this work leaves its readers with a lasting impression— that some of them might see themselves in the struggles of my protagonist as I have in more ways than I ever anticipated, that they might connect with my characters and come to care for them as fiercely as I have— that some aspect of this work and what I'm trying to convey with its writing will stay with them long after they have turned its final page.

Themes

Identity; the pursuit of understanding oneself wholly

A dominant theme in my work throughout its inception has been identity.

Attending a university two hours from home felt as though I was choosing to live in a world apart from the small, largely conservative, town I'd grown up in. To move from the Central Valley of California to Sonoma County was something of a shock to the system for me as an eighteen year old woman still attempting to find her place in the world. It wasn't until my junior year that I began to feel remotely comfortable in my own sexuality and longer still before I became comfortable with my gender identity and the ways in which those intersected and the ways in which they influenced the ways I saw the world. I was incredibly lucky to come out in a community of friends and colleagues I never feared admitting my sexuality to - I had an incredible support system throughout my time at university but I was always painfully aware of the fact that that was not always the case and my coming out experiences have been nuanced and occasionally fraught with discomfort.

My writing seemed to embrace those themes long before I was willing to do it myself— I hungered to see myself in mainstream literature and it was rare that I could do such a thing in a satisfying way. I read most literature I consumed for the program through a lens of queerness and delighted in it when there was enough there for me to write countless papers on the matter. In settling on a protagonist for *Through the Valley* I finally allowed myself the space to explore the slow and oftentimes winding path to embracing and discovering identity that I had grappled with all my life but never felt comfortable enough to process before I was surrounded by people who could help me through it. In the initial chapter the reader finds Evie, the protagonist, grappling with her own feelings and sexual desire for her best friend— being from an intensely religious

family Evie spends most of the first chapter lamenting her feelings and wishing she could change them by any means necessary. It isn't until the closing chapter that she feels comfortable enough to admit her feelings for her best friend and only after her family discovers them together and their budding relationship is brought to an abrupt end by prejudice and their own self-imposed restrictions.

I wanted to explore the notion of identity as something that is ever-changing. Something that people are rarely certain of in the most absolute sense, something that they can continue to discover and unearth and grapple with in ways that are often fulfilling but equally as uncomfortable and disquieting. I wanted to respect the journey many young LGBTQ individuals are forced to confront during their own experiences in grappling with identity and treat it with the utmost care without shying away from the sometimes harsh realities of such an exploration, especially given the time period I have chosen to write within the bounds of. Several of my main protagonists are in the process of coming into their own identities as Evie meets them and my goal is to delve into the emotionally charged and fraught journey people go through simply to find themselves.

Self-acceptance and the ways in which one reaches it

Self-acceptance, in my experience, is something that takes people years to hone. I am nearing twenty-six and most of the time I'm not fully certain I've come anywhere near accepting myself as a nuanced person who is constantly trying their best to make it through life one day at a time. In writing Evie I hoped to grapple with several issues surrounding my own coming out and the ways in which it made me feel wholly other—I wanted to convey a young woman eventually coming to the realization that she was good enough exactly as she was. That no amount of outside influence had to challenge the

ways in which she saw herself and that ultimately it matters little what others think of you so long as you feel comfortable with yourself. Evie struggles with self-acceptance throughout my work— she grapples with her own perceived bravery, believing it is the only thing keeping her from coming out and accepting her own feelings for the girl she loves; she fights to find herself in everyday life - seeking counsel from friends she believes have a better grasp on themselves overall than she herself does. Her journey to self-acceptance is, admittedly, far more short-lived than most peoples' but it is, perhaps, multi-faceted as she comes to accept her identity as a woman and a queer woman at that just before she has successfully disguised herself as a young man with the intention of joining the US Army. Though that part of her journey is not fully covered in my work, nor is her experience in the military as a whole, I wanted to make the point that self-acceptance is an ongoing journey and one that Evie will continue to make likely for the most of what I hope will become a full-length novel.

Comradeship; brotherhood forming in shared experience

Wartime bonds have always fascinated me in a deep way - the psychology of people bonding through shared experience and shared trauma is something that I have personally experienced through my time in Santa Rosa during the fires and bonding with my own friends and loved ones through our collective experiences with various difficult periods in our lives. In my consumption of war literature I was always drawn in by the fact that soldiers during war time often came to view one another as brothers where they were strangers only weeks before. Their shared experiences bonded them quickly and fiercely and that bond, that camaraderie, was something that drew my attention without fail.

It was a theme I knew I wanted to explore when I set out to write *Through the Valley* and one I begin to touch on properly during the final chapter with the introduction of most of the characters Evie will make her journey through boot camp and the remainder of the war with. I endeavored to make each and every one of them dynamic characters - men whom Evie would bond with immediately for some reason or another and whom she would truly connect with during the length of her service. I wanted to play with the idea of brotherhood strictly due to the fact that it is a staple of war literature but also because my protagonist is a young woman and I was curious to delve into the facets of her that allowed her to blend in and truly embrace the experience of brotherhood regardless of the fact that she herself is a woman.

Queerness; how it is expressed and lived by those who experience it

Queer theory was something I'd had the loosest understanding of in high school as something I could consume literature and media through the lens of but my first proper English course in my undergraduate career quickly opened my eyes to the depths applying queer theory to any given work could allow me to plumb in a way I was fully passionate about and resonated with. It quickly became my favorite academic theory to work with both in my undergraduate degree in literature and later my graduate career as a creative writer. I was eager to produce work that I could find myself in, to see queerness reflected in ways I never had as a teenager grasping at anything and everything that made me feel connected to the world and the ways in which my community was represented.

When Evie became the final iteration of my protagonist I knew I wanted to focus on her own embrace of her sexuality and all of the ways she experienced it. I also went out of my way to include other characters across the spectrum of LGBTQ identity

including her first love Maggie, a proud bisexual woman, her friends Ginny and Roger - a lesbian and gay man who married to give themselves a degree of protection against the prejudice of their time, and Freddy, one of the men Evie serves with who is quietly accepting of his own identity as a gay man. It has been my experience that people identifying as queer in any way often have ways of finding and connecting to one another whether they intend to or not and I wanted Evie to have a real sense of community and shared experience in the way I always have as a member of the LGBTQ community.

Why historical fiction?

I have always been deeply passionate about history— it was my minor during my undergrad and something I had enjoyed studying from a young age. It always fascinated me to learn about different periods, to see the ways in which life had and hadn't changed in the years between current time and times passed. I also found, as I began to write more creatively, that I wanted to make historical fiction more accessible to people of varying identities. I wanted to be able to see myself or characters I could relate to in historical fiction in a way I had almost never been able to by the time I entered the graduate program. In my undergraduate program as a history minor I was exposed to Michael Shaara, the father of one of my now favorite authors, Jeff Shaara, both of whom write historical fiction that is both incredibly well researched and extremely enjoyable to read.

I quickly found myself eager to devour their collected works and stumbled upon Jeff Shaara's novel of the first World War, *To the Last Man*. Real historical figures became living, breathing people in the pages of the novel and I was enamored with all of the ways in which he deftly managed to make war itself feel visceral even on the page

and I was equally inspired by the closing of his introduction to the novel in which Shaara states:

“It is my hope that this story will both surprise and entertain you. If occasionally you find the images uncomfortable, or the story line unexpectedly tragic, I can offer no apology for that. The story is true; the images are real. And we must never forget” (Shaara xii).

I was struck by the fact that Shaara held such a commitment to be true to the realities of war - to pull it away from the heroic tales that are so often thrust into the spotlight and instead focus on the rawness and tragedy that conflicts always inspire. I wanted to tap in to his ability to humanize his characters with an ease that I was genuinely envious of the first time I read his work. Historical figures can only be known through the documentation history is willing to give them and to be able to slog through all of that and get to the core of those figures as people was something I deeply appreciated. I endeavored, in *Through the Valley*, to make my characters as real as I possibly could. Their struggles and triumphs, their dreams and desires— regardless of the setting I wanted their humanity to be something that resonated in the work in spite of anything I could do with the setting. Granted, researching for the sake of this project has been something I have deeply enjoyed and it has rekindled a love for history that seemed to fall the slightest bit dormant during the length of my academic career when I was focused more on honing my craft as a writer and less on the logistics of researching for said writing. It is my hope that my own work will find a comfortable, albeit perhaps subversive, place to settle in the expansive library of existing historical fiction.

Work that has influenced me

As I mentioned before I have been incredibly influenced by Jeff Shaara's work in terms of work that has given me a direct example of historical fiction I deeply enjoy and allowed me to see the ways in which it can have an impact on the mainstream market. In terms of writing style rather than practicality, though, I have been deeply influenced by Margaret Atwood and her handle on prose. I read her work for the first time during a literature class in the program and I fell in love with it immediately - she made science-fiction accessible in a beautiful way - her prose was fluid and clean and inspired me immediately to try my hand at writing in a similar way just to see if I had the talent to do it. It seems to me that my writing evolves frequently depending on what I happen to be reading at any given moment and Atwood's work along with the work of Virginia Woolf and more contemporary authors who write novels that are more likely to be adapted into action movies than they are to be studied in a classroom.

I've always been an avid fan of period dramas and historical films and television shows and as I mentioned before several Steven Spielberg headed projects such as *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers* influenced the ways in which I tackled *Through the Valley*. I wanted to grasp at the tone of the media whether I leaned into their themes or otherwise—I wanted to make things raw and visceral whether I was writing emotionally charged scenes or scenes of combat. I wanted to explore the ways in which I could make the experiences as realistic as possible when I have never in my life even approached military combat and the closest I've ever come to experiencing it has been going to a shooting range once in my life.

In the years I've been working on this project there has been an influx, at least it seems that way to me, of media revolving around various instances in World War II that

perhaps haven't been spoken about regularly or haven't been documented in the media. The Battle of Midway covered in the film *Midway*, the evacuation of *Dunkirk*, the experience of a tank crew in the film *Fury*— each and every one of these films has tackled a different facet of the war but each and every one of them have focused on the human cost and the ways in which war shapes the people involved in it without fail. I've seen nearly all of those films and each and every time I found myself that much more inspired to write *Through the Valley*— though I never reached the point in the project, just given the way the narrative evolved, that I was required to write anything close to combat scenarios I wanted to establish characters the reader would feel for when that moment finally comes. Who would be impacted in a likely heart wrenching and hopefully visceral manner when that time finally rolled around. I want my work to be as realistic and moving as all of the media I have mentioned above has been for me over the course of this project and the course of my life as a whole.

Challenges

It took me nearly a year into the program to begin to construct *Through the Valley* in the way I really wanted to— I struggled with the idea of making my main character gay knowing that my family would likely eventually read my work, but after an intense amount of soul searching I realized my work would mean little to me if I couldn't write exactly what I wanted to in exactly the way I wanted it and when Evie became my main character I finally found it easy to work on this project as my passion for it had been entirely renewed. However, while making my main protagonist a young gay woman had made it easier for me to connect with it, it raised a host of difficulties in terms of logistics— how would it be probable for her to join the military when it would be more

likely than not that she would be found out almost immediately? I researched the process of enlisting during the 1940's with painstaking care in an attempt to tackle that issue but nothing seemed to provide the sort of answers I was hoping for. It proved to be a roadblock but logistically and creatively before I decided that fiction - historical fiction or not - could be consumed with a suspension of disbelief no matter how small and I could still make *Through the Valley* feel accurate to the time period I was hoping to embody without compromising the story I really wanted to tell.

Research in and of itself proved to be something of a challenge overall as I tried to construct a story that would feel appropriate for the time period without feeling silly or like I was trying too hard. I wanted the characters to feel realistic, wanted them to speak the way they might have in the '40's without it feeling quaint or ridiculous, wanted to get my facts straight when it came to the things they might have been doing or the concerns they might have had overall in their day to day lives. I spent countless hours researching everything from what sort of crops were grown in Montana where the initial part of this project is set to what ration cards and enlistment papers looked like to how likely it would be that a recently graduated high school age girl would be to have a proper job or whether she could casually wear jeans in an every day situation. My research has been occasionally challenging but ultimately one of the more rewarding parts of this project as a whole and it's something I deeply hope comes across in terms of the care I have taken to make this as historically accurate as I possibly can.

What I want my writing to accomplish

In the broader scope of mainstream historical fiction I'm still not entirely sure where my work would fit— would an audience used to the gritty war stories that mark

the genre find anything interesting in the inner workings of a teenage girl doing something as outrageous and dangerous as posing as a man to become a soldier? I set out to write a story that was both relatable and challenging. Something that was unlike anything else I'd ever seen on the market prior because I felt there needed to be something like it in the world and I thought perhaps my work would be as good a place as any to start. I wanted to explore people as close to reality as they could be when pressed to the written page; I want people to read my work and realize that they can see themselves in it more readily than they ever expected to. I want my work to have an impact on young people in the LGBTQ community who have perhaps never been able to consume media that really hits on any particular part of their own struggles in life in any concrete way.

In writing this thesis I am making my first foray into sharing my work with openness and honesty that is often anxiety inducing and terrifying to me, but it is something I feel, at this point in my life, I have to become more comfortable with if I want to be able to reach people the way I've always hoped my writing would. I want to prove that you can be someone who has struggled and someone who has clawed their way out of those struggles tooth and nail and still managed to come out on the other side with the wherewithal to produce something that both touches on those struggles and transcends them. In my mind historical fiction is simply a genre— a foundation on which I can build my work in a way that satisfies me; rather than conforming to the usual points that mark historical fiction I felt I wanted to use it as a jumping off point to explore writing work that could challenge preconceived notions of what fiction ought to be rather than what it can be. Fiction is, above all, an exploration of the inner workings of its

writers and I want nothing more than for people to see these inner workings of mine and find themselves in them as best they can.

Works Cited

Shaara, Jeff. *To the Last Man*. Transworld Digital, 2010.

Chapter 1

Sunlight streamed through the stable doors and windows illuminating a single mare and the slim figure of a person by the animal's side. Long, pale fingers dragged themselves through the rough darkness of the horse's mane. The animal nudged her snout against

Evie's jaw with affection, and a soft, lilting peal of laughter escaped Evie's lips— it shifted into a bright giggle: loud and unabashed and content.

“I love you too, girl,” she murmured.

It was, perhaps, the quietest morning she'd had in weeks. A rare morning that hadn't involved attending mass, or the variety of chores living on a farm as large as theirs required, or even the raucousness that accompanied her twin siblings raising hell with the express intent of earning some sort of reaction from her; reactions that tended to be rather soft in comparison to the wrath Aggie Prescott could visit upon her children when provoked. Her brothers in particular had always railed against the quiet that lent itself to their daily lives— they fought it off with chatter and movement and an intensity that seemed, for the most part, to have skipped both Evie and her younger sister Anne. They held their intensity in other places— in the glint in their eyes when they were challenged, the calm assertion they could slip into their words as easily as they breathed, and their ability to calm any situation without batting an eye. They had strengths in droves, all of them, and Evie felt a blooming warmth in her chest at the thought.

A breeze ruffled her hair in the same moment her lips curled into a smile, and Evie busied herself digging an apple out of the pockets of her trousers that she'd snuck from the kitchen for the express purpose of visiting Simone. Her fingers wrapped around it with a triumphant hum, and she offered it to the mare with a coo of encouragement. Simone had been her horse to care for since she was old enough to be allowed anywhere near the animals they raised on the property, and their bond had been unshakable from the moment they met each other. When Evie was free in any capacity she slipped into the stable to sit with Simone; occasionally with a book in hand or a few treats for her horse

but always with a smile and an eagerness to allow herself a few moments free from any particular activity.

Simone busied herself with the proffered apple, and the mare's tongue brushed her fingers in passing; the mare accepted a gentle pat on the head before Evie stepped away to allow her a moment to enjoy the treat. The teenager's toes pushed towards the damp earth on the stable's floor through the leather of her boots, a sigh escaping her as she took in the feeling of the sunlight on her skin in the damp morning air.

“Evie?”

A high, clear call drew Evie's eyes towards the open stable door and for the briefest of moments she contemplated ignoring it; contemplated sitting against the closest stall door and dozing for as long as she could manage without being interrupted by anyone. She contemplated it for a long moment despite knowing full well she would never and could never bring herself to ignore Maggie Mackenzie when she came calling. Evie hooked her thumbs through the edges of her suspenders and crossed the distance from Simone's stall to the door in a few loping strides. Her auburn hair tumbled into her eyes as she rounded the corner and paused with a jerk; she wet her lips, and felt, with a keen interest, her heart doing a sort of jig somewhere beyond her ribs. It hadn't always been her reaction to laying eyes on her best friend— as children they'd been attached at the hip with nothing more than whatever bright, open, unerring love children could muster for the people around them. Even as teenagers she'd done little more, in her mind, than admire what an incredible person Maggie was growing up to be. She'd always been a bright light amongst the people in their lives, and Evie admired the way Maggie seemed to bring the best out in anyone she met just by gracing them with her attention.

When they'd turned sixteen within weeks of one another Evie had written off her bone deep enjoyment of their time together as the sort of fondness that could only be built between people who'd known one another their entire lives; whose thoughts were in tune with one another's on a level that other people simply didn't share. In some deep corner of her mind she knew, or at least suspected, that she was deluding herself— her feelings for Maggie were friendly at their core she supposed, but there was something else there, some underlying attraction that made Evie nearly shake every moment Maggie had her eyes on her. They'd been lying on a hill that overlooked both their farms and the greater part of Billings when she'd felt it the first time; when Maggie's fingers had begun to trace patterns on the back of her hand and her heart leaped into the same jig it had seemed intent on performing every day since. That in and of itself wasn't unusual and Evie had fought to ignore the flush that roared into her cheeks the moment Maggie's skin brushed against hers, and fought even harder to quell the shame that flooded through her in the same moment she felt heat settle low and searing in her belly.

She'd gone to confession the Sunday after it had happened; mumbled hail Mary's until tears streamed down her cheeks and her rosary cut patterns into her palms and still the feelings refused to fade. Still she looked at her best friend and felt something she knew, in some deep, dark corner of her mind, extended far beyond the bounds of the relationship they'd had before. She contemplated admitting her feelings to Maggie constantly; Maggie who was freer than anyone she knew— who spent her time, as she'd explained once in a low voice, with boys and girls alike and seemed that much happier for it. She contemplated it and still had never done it. For as much bravery as she hoped she could have in life it all seemed to fail her in the face of her feelings. Evie could admit

she was a coward. She could admit it and lament it and do everything in her power to change it, but she knew she'd never feel all that brave until she could share her feelings with Maggie.

“Evie?”

Maggie's voice shook her away from her thoughts and she smiled brightly despite the dismal storm clouds of feelings swirling around somewhere in her mind.

“Sorry, Mags, I was just thinkin’.”

Maggie smiled even as she rolled her eyes, “You go about a thousand miles away whenever you do that. I wanted to ask you something!” Maggie paused, peeking into the stable beyond them for a moment, “Unless you still have chores?”

Evie glanced back over her shoulder, “I finished ‘em a while ago. What did you want to ask?” Her heart pounded so hard she could feel the pulses in her entire body.

“Wanna go for a ride?” Maggie's eyes were bright as she flashed Evie a broad smile.

Taking the horses out was something closer to a treat during harvest season—working on the farm to get their crops ready to be sold tended to leave Evie with more to do in her daily life than she knew what to do with and whatever free time she had was often saved for reading or going downtown to work at the malt shop as she'd done in the year since she'd graduated high school. There was occasional talk among her family about whether she ought to save up the money for college, but Evie was far too content in the life she was living to see much need to change it one way or another. Still, she was rarely able to deny Maggie anything when she came around and they rode out to their spot on the hill every other week or so when no one seemed to want their collective

attention much at all. It was such an inevitability for her to agree to go that even as she hemmed and hawed and attempted to make excuses with Maggie laughing softly behind her she began to tack Simone and one of their other horses for the excursion. With Maggie's help it took only a few minutes and Evie led the horses out of the stable with coos of encouragement and the promise of future treats in the form of the food Maggie tended to bring with her on their rides.

The ride up to the hill took no more than twenty minutes by Evie's estimation, and with the bright Montana sun at her back and Maggie's laughter in her ears any time they urged the horses into a gallop for moments at a time to allow the animals to stretch their legs she felt as though every moment that extended before them was perfect. They spent ten minutes or so with their toes in the little stream at the base of the hill, and allowed the horses to drink before they led them away and settled down cross-legged and a little sweaty, grinning at each other like they were both sunshine personified. Evie imagined, if she squinted hard enough, she could see people strolling through the streets of Billings at their leisure, completely removed from her and anything she thought or felt about anything at all. There was something freeing about it. No one seemed to have stumbled across their little hideaway and Evie was relieved that she could continue to share the spot with Maggie without anyone else invading.

Evie stretched out and sighed, the long grass around them tickling her cheeks and the skin of her arms that her shirt sleeves couldn't cover. She turned her head to face Maggie, swallowing past the lump in her throat that formed the moment Maggie's vibrant blue eyes met hers. She entertained, for the briefest of moments, the thought of scooting

closer and kissing her; though, as soon as the thought coalesced into a strong urge she jerked her head away and offered a shaky exhale to the still air around them.

“Did you read the paper today?” Evie asked after a moment, desperate for something to fill the silence between them.

“I got about half a look when Jimmy was reading it after Pa was finished. Is there more news about the war?” There was a certain amount of apprehension in Maggie’s tone and that in and of itself was startling to Evie who almost always expected Maggie to be calm and certain in any situation.

“I suppose. President Roosevelt is sending money to the Soviets; the Krauts are on their doorstep and none of ‘em seem to know how to handle it,” Evie hadn’t read it all that thoroughly, simply attempted to glance through it to assure herself that they hadn’t been dragged into any part of the war as a country. “Jack and Tommy would go overseas right now if we didn’t need them here... Mama’s not too happy about it but they’re both grown and we wouldn’t be able to do anything about it if they decide to go.” She paused, a pang of fear ripping through her. “I don’t know what I’d do if they went so soon. It feels like they just enlisted and now... all of this.” She felt her eyes watering and wiped at them, swallowing hard and turning her attention to the few clouds drifting by them.

Maggie’s fingers slipped through hers so gently Evie almost started when Maggie squeezed her hand for a long moment, “If something happens and they go away you know they’ll make it home. Remember what your daddy always says? The boys are tougher than boiled owls,” Maggie imitated Mr. Prescott in such a dramatic, deep voice that Evie couldn’t help but smile.

Her older brothers had enlisted on the same day two years ago: Tommy in the peacetime army and Jack in the Marines; neither of them seemed afraid of what it could mean for them if the United States entered the war and as far as Evie could tell both of them enjoyed their service. Tommy went away at least once or twice a year for training, and always came back with stories to tell— though he'd been talking more often about using the money he'd been saving up from his service to go to college and propose to his high school sweetheart. Jack had been married for a year already and everyone in the family wondered when it would be that he gave them the news that Rose was pregnant. It seemed only a matter of time. With everything they had going for them in Billings it was difficult to imagine either of them being sent away and Evie struggled to assure herself that they would stay if they could. Unless the war made its way to America, she hoped they would stay safe and well exactly where they were.

“Thank you,” Evie murmured, squeezing Maggie’s hand in return before she untangled their fingers. Any longer and she worried Maggie might notice how sweaty her palms had gotten with their extended contact.

“For what?” Maggie’s brow furrowed.

Evie smiled, “For making me feel better.”

“Well, I’ve always had a knack for it, haven’t I?” Maggie grinned and winked, and Evie buried her face into her shoulder as best she could to hide the furious blush that hardly seemed intent on leaving her.

Evie fiddled with the grass beneath her fingers for a quiet moment, plucking stalks and keeping her hands busy tying them into knots or little rings or a variety of things meant to distract her from the flush in her cheeks. Maggie seemed content to allow

the silence to stretch between them, and Evie wondered just how long she could handle not filling it with something other than her own anxiety at her reactions to nearly everything Maggie did.

“Did I tell you about my date with Marjorie Collins?” Maggie asked.

Evie frowned for a moment and cleared her throat, “No, I don’t think you did. How...” She trailed off and fought the urge to groan aloud at the sour feeling burning in the back of her throat, “How’d it go?”

“Oh, she’s lovely.” Maggie smiled and Evie felt her face flush for an entirely different reason, something hard and corrosive in her as she glanced at Maggie from the corner of her eye. “I nearly missed curfew because we were caught up in each other and I can’t remember the last time that happened.” Her laughter rang in Evie’s ears.

“I’m glad you had fun,” Evie mumbled, pushing herself into a sitting position and picking at a thread in her trousers that had been threatening to unravel for days.

“Are you?” Maggie replied, something haughty in her tone even as she rested her hand on the small of Evie’s back.

Evie balked, her fingers tightening their grip against her clothes for a fraction of a second, “What?” Her voice was low and strained and it took her several seconds to even look back at Maggie.

“Are you *really* glad I had fun?” Maggie repeated, her jaw set with an air of determination that made Evie feel far too lightheaded for far too long.

“Yes,” Evie whispered after several seconds of tense silence, fumbling to pull herself to her feet and refusing to meet Maggie’s eyes. She catalogued everything she’d have to confess on Sunday - chief of all being the way her heart hammered in her chest as

she watched Maggie, who was looking at her with the imperious tilt of her chin that seemed reserved for her strongest moments. It took Evie's breath away and she felt the urge to kiss Maggie again screaming somewhere in the back of her head, screaming and urging and going ignored to the point that Evie thought she might cry from the force of suppressing it. "Are you ready to go home?" she blurted, shoving her hands in her pockets, and turning towards the horses without waiting for an answer.

Maggie's sigh sounded more like a gunshot to her ears and Evie clenched her hands into fists as her best friend muttered something in assent. Evie glanced back at her and wondered if Maggie could see just how sorry she was; if it was clear how much she regretted not being able to accept the way she was feeling.

"I'm sorry," Evie whispered.

Maggie continued towards the horses as though she hadn't heard, and Evie choked back a hysterical cry bubbling somewhere in her chest as her apology floated away on the wind.

Hazel eyes widened in the early afternoon sunlight in the brief moment Evie allowed herself to inspect the new apartment building in front of her; it was less than a year old, and had been the talk of the town for months before its construction had even been half finished. It had the important distinction in her life of being home to one of her close friends— Virginia Sullivan— who everyone in the world seemed to call Ginny, and whom Evie trusted to the point that Ginny had been the first person she had ever admitted her attraction to women to. It helped, really, that Ginny herself was exclusively attracted to women and although she was married - to another friend, Roger, who was - as he often

put it - queer as a three dollar bill - she made no apologies whatsoever for who she was and Evie took an immense amount of comfort in having her in her life. Ginny was two years older and they had met through Evie's older Jack who had befriended Ginny during their time together in high school; Evie had been enamored by Ginny's confidence and grace and she could admit to herself now that they'd known one another for a few years, that she'd had at least a passing crush on the older woman.

Ginny was the only person in the world aside from Maggie she felt comfortable talking to about anything at all; though the fact that she still hadn't been able to admit her sexuality to Maggie meant that Ginny held the singular title of being someone Evie shared everything about herself with if only to have someone who understood listen to the things she was struggling with. It had taken Ginny all of a minute upon seeing Evie several days after her argument with Maggie to recognize that the younger woman was hurting, and Ginny had requested that Evie make the time to come and visit her and Roger both when she had a spare moment. And now there she was two days later, shifting on the balls of her feet in the delicate yellow dress she'd worn to church that made her feel uncomfortable.

The Sullivan's apartment was on the second floor and Evie debated turning around and leaving several times in the few minutes it took for her to climb the stairs; it wasn't anything against Ginny. She adored her and adored her presence whenever she had the occasion to be in it— it was Evie's own issue. The fact that she was borderline terrified to admit to her feelings to Maggie in any concrete way. To allow them out into the world would make them that much more tangible, and that much more difficult to ignore if it came to pass that she never spoke to Maggie again. The thought alone was

enough to make her chest ache and she had a brief, startling image of her ribs cracking under the force of her sadness only to pierce her heart and prompt the pain that was rattling through her chest.

When she reached their front door her anxiety seemed to fade just enough to allow her to rap on the door with a firm hand, and it faded that much further when Ginny's smiling face met her on the other side of the door. The older woman reached for her immediately, and Evie smiled against the top of Ginny's head as the slightly shorter woman wrapped her up in a hug that was full to the brim with affection. "Well, don't you look cute as a button, little miss Evie?" Ginny said when she pulled away, her green eyes bright and cheerful.

Evie felt her cheeks color under the attention and shifted self-consciously for a moment before Ginny giggled, patted her cheek and pulled her inside with a firm hand. Clad in one of Roger's flannels and jeans that seemed to be tailored to her body Ginny seemed to be far more comfortable than Evie felt in the moment, and she felt a brief sting of jealousy corrode against something in her stomach though it felt childish and silly to feel such a way about one of her friends.

"Do you want something else to wear, Eves?" Ginny asked, as if she could read Evie's mind as easily as breathing.

Dark hair fluttered against her cheeks in the moment it took for Evie to shake her head, "I don't want to impose."

Ginny snorted out a laugh Evie's mother would have found unladylike, "You're just being silly now, sweetheart. You know I don't mind sharing and Roger has quite a few shirts that should fit you— all you have to do is say the word."

Evie found herself grateful for the lengths Ginny was willing to go to just to accommodate her and she managed another nod even as her cheeks colored out of embarrassment. “Well, I don’t really want to be in this dress longer than I have to, so that would be really nice.”

Ginny clapped her hands together with a grin and rose from the sofa in the front room to amble into the back bedroom, returning several moments later with a dark flannel shirt and a pair of jeans— she shoved them into Evie’s arms without ceremony and Evie couldn’t help but giggle before she turned on her heel in the direction of the bathroom and emerged a few minutes later with a relieved smile stretched across her lips. “You’re an angel, Mrs. Sullivan,” Evie announced, taking a place next to Ginny on the sofa and kicking her shoes off before she crossed her legs and leaned back into the couch with a soft sigh.

“Anything for you, Eves,” Ginny replied, reaching out to tap the tip of Evie’s nose and wink in a way that made Evie’s cheeks flush all over again in time with Ginny’s laughter. “I know you didn’t come all this way just to get a change of clothes.” She continued, fixing Evie with a look that was equal parts firm and curious.

“I had a fight with Maggie.” It was difficult to admit, and Evie felt like the words were stinging the back of her tongue as they struggled to escape. Her lips curved downwards at the edges, and her eyes stung with the threat of tears before she felt Ginny’s hands on her shoulders and buried her face into the other woman’s neck with a ragged, sharp breath. “I haven’t seen her in a week, and I—” She choked on the explanation with a strangled whine, and Ginny made a soothing noise in the back of her throat, running her fingers through Evie’s hair in a way that had always soothed the

younger woman. “She had a date a while ago with Marjorie Collins, and that’s fine and I like Marjorie alright but I just...” She pulled away from Ginny and shook her head, her frown deepening.

“Don’t like to hear about it?” Ginny supplied; a blonde brow arched in question.

“Yeah,” Evie admitted, “It just makes me—I get so *jealous* and I have no right to and I always feel so awful about it afterwards but I can’t—I don’t know how to feel alright with how I feel about Maggie. Every time I try, I just imagine how disappointed my parents would be if they knew, and it makes me sick to my stomach. But I can’t...” She huffed out a frustrated breath and wiped at her eyes, “I love her, Ginny. I can’t stop feeling the way I do, and I don’t know how to tell her, or what I’m supposed to do. I’m so lost.”

Ginny’s eyes were soft as they flickered over Evie’s face, and Evie averted her gaze in response. “I take it you haven’t said any of that to Maggie, huh?”

“How can I? She deserves to be with someone who isn’t afraid to love her,” Evie replied, her voice nearly a whisper and her face hot with shame and every other negative emotion that flooded through her every time she paused to consider how much she loved Maggie and how that seemed to matter so very little in the face of her own bravery or lack thereof.

“You’re seventeen years old, sweetheart—I would be amazed if you weren’t afraid to be in love at your age no matter who it was. And for the record? You deserve to love whoever you want, Evie, no matter how scared you are. All you need to do is talk to her. It doesn’t take a genius to see that that girl loves you just as much as you love her.” Ginny’s words were firm, and they left so little room for argument that all Evie could do

was stare at the older woman as her sluggish thoughts hurried to process what she was being told. “You know where Roger is right now? With the love of his life. He’s my best friend in the world and all this wedding ring does,” She paused to wave her left hand and Evie watched as the sunlight glinted on the wedding band on her finger, “Is proves how devoted we are to being happy. I love that man with everything I am, but we married each other so we could have the freedom to love the people we really want. I don’t see you doing that any time soon, but if you came to me so I would tell you *not* to tell Maggie how you feel then you’re going to be disappointed.”

It took Evie nearly a full ten seconds to recognize the wetness slipping down her face as tears, and she reached up to wipe them away with a hard sniffle. She knew she had come to see Ginny because the older woman would encourage her to live her life the way she wanted to— she knew that it would be Ginny who could talk her into sharing her feelings with Maggie or, at the very least, having a conversation with her that made it clear that she never wanted to be away from her without contact for such a long time if she had anything to say about it. Ginny was a far braver woman than Evie had ever considered herself to be, and she was strong and kind and everything Evie aspired to be as a person. The fact that Ginny was so patient with her and so willing to walk her through the ins and outs of admitting her attraction to women and acting on it was nothing short of incredible to her.

“I knew you weren’t going to tell me to avoid it,” Evie said, “You don’t really let me run away from anything, Gin. I need that.”

Ginny smiled and reached out to brush Evie's hair behind her ear with a gentle hand, "I want you to be happy, Evie. If I can help you do that even a little, then I've done something right."

Evie unfolded herself from her cross-legged position on the couch to lean into Ginny, wrapping her arms around the other woman as though she might never see her again. Ginny's breath puffed against the side of her face as the older woman laughed and leaned in to press a kiss to Evie's forehead, "I love you too, kiddo."

Plaid fabric shifted across her back as Evie hefted a large bag of harvested wheat onto one shoulder, shifting her weight to accommodate the load while her eyes drifted towards Tommy doing the same beside her. Harvesting was a family affair for the Prescotts and although the youngest siblings were spared the work due in part to both their size and their enrollment in school, the middle Prescott children were often found trailing behind the horse-drawn harvester collecting bags of wheat to be stored and sold in town when all was said and done. Evie's shoulder rippled with the strain and a groan rumbled in the back of her throat; it was nearing two in the afternoon and their father had woken them at five that morning to begin their work— with Thanksgiving fast approaching Ernest Prescott wanted nothing more than to sell off their haul and provide his family with a rare luxurious meal. Regardless of the intensity of the work and the demands it placed on her body Evie was content to help her brothers and father with the farming when it came down to it; it was a soothing distraction from the current string of dark moods that had plagued her in the two weeks since her trip to the hill with Maggie.

With their relationship being what it was there had hardly been a day in either of their lives that they hadn't seen one another, or snuck notes to each other in the pockets of their respective parents' or siblings' clothes when they weren't free to visit in person. Two weeks without a word between them was a sort of torture Evie prayed would end one way or another; whether it ended their friendship or one of them capitulated to the desire to repair things she had no preference. Anything that would allow her to walk past the Mackenzie family's farm without her stomach churning would more than satisfy her.

She approached the barn with Tommy and ignored the muscles in her shoulder and back as they screamed for relief. The aches and pains that came with their labor had never bothered her, and even when they did and she found herself ignoring them - a good night's sleep did more to soothe them than anything she'd tried to date— ignoring the pain, a strategy she had come to employ with many things in her life, was often easier than dealing with it. The sacks of wheat hit the ground in the barn with a pair of thumps, and Evie stretched before Tommy clapped her on the shoulder and gave her a broad, relieved grin.

“I think Ma wanted you to go pick up the twins, Eve.” Tommy announced, wiping sweat from his face with the hem of his t-shirt.

Evie was quiet for a moment as she busied herself replicating her brother's action, “I'll go check with her right now,” she mumbled, digging her fingers into the meat of her shoulder with a grimace.

“You alright, kid?”

Her eyes shifted towards him, “Yeah, Tommy. I'm alright.”

Tommy's brow furrowed deeply, and Evie recognized the expression of disbelief clouding his features. "You're not lying to me, are you?"

"I—" Evie's voice died somewhere in the back of her throat and she shook her head. There was a question in her brother's voice— something he wasn't asking her directly, but she knew that he wanted to know what was causing her the stress she'd been exhibiting of late. Her jaw worked from side to side for a long moment, "I'm not alright now, Tom. But I think I will be. I gotta go find Ma." She ducked out of the barn without another word, ignoring Tommy's call for her to come back for just a moment longer. It was difficult enough for her to consider the depth of her sadness alone; sharing it with her family was something she would rather avoid if it was within her power to do so.

"Mama?" Evie called out the moment her scuffed boots hit the first porch step.

"In the kitchen, sweetheart." Aggie's response was almost immediate, and Evie rounded the corner into the kitchen and greeted her mother with a smile.

"Am I going into town to get the twins?" Evie asked, taking a moment to peer into the fridge for something she might be able to snatch for a snack on the way there. Her mother rapped a wooden spoon against her knuckles in response, and Evie pouted as she held her hand to her chest and rubbed the sting away.

Aggie smiled and kissed Evie's forehead, "You can have a biscuit when you get home with the twins, but I do not want you spoiling your dinner." She explained, smoothing some of Evie's flyaway hair down with a pass of her hand.

"Yes, ma'am," Evie assented, settling for gulping down a glass of water before she hurried towards the front door again, snatching one of Tommy's caps from the rack as she went.

Neither of her parents were particularly thrilled by her choice of clothes of late—she'd raided Tommy's closet for various pairs of jeans and a few flannel shirts that he seemed not to have noticed were gone, or allowed her to have for the sake of ease. The sleeves fell past her hands when they were unrolled, and the jeans were cuffed almost to the point of comedy so there was little chance of wearing them down because she was getting them caught on the heels of her boots as she walked. She adjusted her sleeves again as she walked down the lane that led away from the farm and into town, waving goodbye to her father and brothers as she kicked up small clouds of dust in her wake. With her hair tucked up into Tommy's cap she almost passed for one of her brothers, and she wondered for a brief moment how many times people in town would mistake her for them from afar—before they noticed the more delicate slope of her features past the strength of her jaw.

The walk into Billings proper wasn't a long one. It was a bit of luck that her father had purchased a stake of land closer to town than any of their fellow farmers considering how often the various Prescotts found reasons to stroll through the concrete modernity that seemed so far removed from their farm. She might have asked her father to borrow the family truck if she knew he wouldn't spend a great deal of time lecturing her on the current price of gas and the care they needed to take with their vehicle as parts became far more scarce and any small problem seemed capable of ruining the chance of mobility altogether. Truthfully, Evie preferred walking to driving; it gave her more time to herself, and the opportunity to stop and chat with the people in town who would catch her attention if she wasn't in a hurry one way or another.

Her younger siblings' school was only a minute or two outside of downtown, and Evie waved to anyone she recognized as they passed by her; Billings wasn't a small town but it seemed to her that she'd met everyone there was to meet during her shifts at the malt shop, and none of them had ever been anything but kind to her. Children had already begun to trickle out of the building by the time she reached the front gate, and her eyes scanned the small crowd building for a fraction of a second before a force of eager energy barreled through a group of waiting mothers and straight at her. Her laughter was bright as she wrapped her arms around Annie and her baby sister clutched at her waist with a broad smile; Ben followed behind and leaned up on the tips of his toes as Evie leaned down to meet him and her brother pressed a kiss to her cheek in greeting.

"Hi, munchkins." Evie held her hands out for each of her siblings to take as they began the trek back through the streets in the direction of their home. "What'd you learn today?" She asked, a smile curling her lips upwards as Annie asked if she could ride on Evie's back for the length of their walk. Evie was quick to accommodate her baby sister even as her shoulders tensed in protest; Annie's excitement was more than enough to make the impromptu piggy back ride worth it and the three of them seemed full to the brim of affection as they hit the dirt path that rolled through the countryside.

"Long division," Ben answered, an expression of distaste on his face. "Annie's really good at it. I don't really like it but I'm trying really hard." He explained, glancing up at Evie as he spoke.

She grinned down at him and released his hand for a moment to ruffle his hair, "You'll both be great at it in no time, buddy. We can practice at home if you need to, okay?"

He nodded in agreement, and Evie took his hand again as Annie rambled about everything they'd gotten to do over the course of their school day. Evie felt at peace for the first time in days, and the relief of it was so palpable it almost brought her to tears. Her stomach fluttered with nerves as they approached the Mackenzie farm, and Annie slipped off her back as Evie paused, torn between indecision as she noticed Maggie lingering at the turn onto the long drive leading to her home.

"Can we go the rest of the way?" Annie asked, taking Ben's hand as they waited for a response.

Evie's eyes flickered towards them and back to Maggie before she nodded, "Sure you can. Just be careful, okay?"

The twins grinned at her in lieu of a response and raced down the hard-packed dirt road towards their property, their laughter echoing back to Evie as she approached Maggie with her heart in her throat. It seemed unfair that Maggie's strawberry blonde hair shone in the light, and her eyes seemed brighter and bluer than Evie had ever seen them. Her brothers would have called her a vision and Evie would have agreed without a second thought, and the notion alone made her so soft and uncomfortable in equal measure that she had no idea how to process any of it. Evie's boots against the dirt seemed as loud as cannon fire as she stopped in front of Maggie, her own dark eyes settled firmly on the tips of her boots and not, as she wanted them to be, on Maggie's face.

"Hey, stranger," Maggie greeted. Her voice was tentative and soft, and Evie's stomach did something akin to a barrel roll at the sound of it.

Evie dragged her eyes up to meet Maggie's and smiled, "Hi, Mags." Her own voice was almost strained, and she licked her lips as her hands curled into fists in her pockets. It had never been awkward to be around Maggie, and the contrast of tension the moment held in comparison to their usual interactions threatened to unravel her.

Maggie seemed to teeter between speech and silence, and she reached towards Evie for a moment before she paused and pulled her hand away. "I'm so sorry, Eve." Her eyes were pained, and Evie swallowed past the lump tightening her throat.

"I hate not seeing you," Evie mumbled, reaching for Maggie before she could give herself enough time to doubt her decision and pulling the shorter girl into a tight hug. It was almost euphoric to have Maggie in her arms, and her grip against Maggie's back was borderline desperate as the depth of the emotions she was feeling washed over her. Maggie's shoulders were trembling, and Evie had an abrupt realization that she might have been crying and pulled away enough to see for herself. Tears slipped down Maggie's cheeks in sharp contrast to her smile and Evie reached up to wipe them away with the pads of her thumbs as a deep frown settled on her face.

"Please don't cry," Evie said, her palms too warm against Maggie's cheeks.

"I wasn't sure you would want to see me. I'm so relieved," Maggie replied, her own hands coming to rest on Evie's with almost no hesitation.

Evie's expression was almost dubious, and her breath caught so firmly in her throat as Maggie slipped away from her grasp and pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth that she thought she might pass out from the sheer force of her body stuttering to a halt. Her skin seemed to burn where Maggie's lips had touched it, and Evie raised her trembling fingers to the spot with open disbelief. Two weeks apart had made Maggie

bolder, it seemed, and even the various conversations Evie had had with Ginny, who had been the first to define what Evie felt for Maggie, did not seem to have prepared her for her own reactions to Maggie's attention. Evie stammered through a few wordless syllables as a flush crept up from her neck and into her cheeks and the tips of her ears.

"What was that?" Evie managed, choking out the words through the fog that had settled over every process her body seemed capable of.

Maggie's smile was effervescent, "I just missed you." Her expression faltered for a moment as she looked up into Evie's eyes, "Should I not do that?"

Evie blinked owlishly, "N-no. I mean, n-no you don't have to... *not* do that," she finished. The tension in her shoulders seemed ever present, and Evie had a profound urge to grip her rosary between her fingers as she wondered what it would have felt like had Maggie's kiss landed where she seemed to have wanted it to. "I um... I still don't know how to do this, Mags. It's all... new. I'm scared." She admitted, squeezing Maggie's hand as her eyes darted across the planes of Maggie's face.

Maggie nodded, a soft, relieved smile on her face despite the quiet sadness reflected in her eyes, "I can give you time. As much as you need, okay? We can sort this out together." Her hand found its way to Evie's cheek and Evie leaned into the touch without hesitation; if she was going to Hell for feeling the way she did about Maggie, well, she was sure she ought to feel as fiercely as she possibly could— nothing seemed capable of dulling her feelings for her best friend and Evie was so, so tired of pretending she could wipe them away with a few prayers and a promise to do better.

“I need to go see if Mama still needs help with dinner,” Evie announced, brushing her thumb against the back of Maggie’s hand with an apologetic smile. “Can I see you tomorrow?”

Maggie grinned and leaned up to kiss Evie’s cheek, “Of course you can.” She stepped away from Evie, her grin still in place, “See you tomorrow, Eve.”

Evie grinned back, “See you tomorrow, Mags.”

The low rumble of their truck idling was almost too loud in the quiet of the morning, and Evie hurried to pull herself into the truck bed with Jack at her heels. They had finished their yearly harvest just days before Thanksgiving, to her father’s immense pleasure, and the end of the tradition required them to haul their crop into town for pocket money as a unit; partially because Ernest needed help to get everything in order when they arrived at the general store, and the children could be counted on to spare their father much of the heavy lifting if they could help it. Evie sighed as the cool morning air tickled her skin, lounging against a pile of sacks bearing their haul as she pulled her cap down to cover her eyes.

“You sound like you’re in a good mood.” The deep tenor of Jack’s voice was soothing, and Evie cracked an eye open to glance at her brother with a smile.

“Do I?” Evie countered, “It’s just a nice morning is all. Don’t you think so?”

Jack offered her a fond smile, “I do think so, but it seems like you’ve been so down lately. It’s nice to see you smilin’ again,” He explained, resting his elbows on his knees as he swayed with the bounce of the truck on the road.

“It’s nice to be smiling again,” Evie replied, stretching her legs out as best she could in the limited space she had.

Jack patted her knee, and even without a verbal response he managed to convey a great deal of affection in the simple gesture. He’d always gone out of his way to look out for all of his siblings as the oldest, and Evie felt a deep twinge of adoration for her oldest brother as she considered just how in tune to their moods and feelings he always seemed to be, even when he wasn’t living with them any longer. In spite of the occasional confrontation they got into about Evie’s choice of dress, or her choice of companionship on occasion, she knew that Jack wanted the best for each of them and tended to do his very best to achieve that - whether he stepped on toes along the way or not.

The truck rolled to a stop outside of the market on the edge of town and Evie hauled herself to her feet and hopped over the side of the truck bed, landing with a soft thump as her feet hit the ground.

“Mornin’, Prescotts!” Marty, the man who owned and ran the market with his brother, greeted, shaking her father’s hand as they approached him.

“Mornin’, Marty,” The Prescott kids chimed in unison, smiling at the older man with perfect politeness.

“You guys selling today?” Marty asked, peering into the back of the truck with keen eyes.

“Yes’sir,” Jack answered, already approaching the truck to begin unloading it as Ernest led Marty away to discuss prices for their produce and any goods they might be able to trade for if he was in a giving mood.

Twenty minutes later Evie and Jack fumbled their way back into the truck bed with their own portions of pocket money from the harvest rustling in their pockets. Jack saved almost every penny of his for emergencies, or treating his wife to something nice; Tommy had reminded them he was saving for an engagement ring for his girlfriend Eleanor, and Evie had, as she often did, no idea what she was going to spend her money on. She saved almost everything she got from working at the malt shop, and any money their father gave her for her part in the harvest was often spent on something she'd been wanting for a long while or something she saw on a whim. Jack pitched her ideas as the truck rumbled along, with Tommy interjecting every so often from the open back window of the cab and Evie grinned and listened as their overlapping chatter filled her ears.

November crept to a slow close, and Evie delighted in the approach of December and the promise of snow and time off and endless mugs of her mother's homemade hot chocolate and countless evenings spent tucked into various comfortable spaces in the den listening to radio shows with the rest of the family settled around her. The air had become crisp and cold during the previous month, and the soft sheen of frost against the grass every morning she left the house for some errand or another made her immensely happy.

Winter was her favorite season by a mile, and it seemed to improve her day to day moods the longer she spent indulging in everything she adored about it. Walking Maggie home from her shifts at the public library when harvest season was over was something Evie had added to her ever expanding list of favorite winter activities; especially considering they often joined arms or gloved hands and huddled as close to each other as they could and still be capable of walking along without tripping over their feet.

“How was work today?” Evie asked, reaching up with a free hand to rub some warmth back into the tip of her nose.

Maggie hummed and took a few moments to consider the question, “Not too bad, I think. Everyone’s bringing in the kids to get Christmas books, and I caught Jimmy Gallagher and his girlfriend making out in the stacks. I don’t think I’ve seen him that embarrassed since his brother pantsed him at the homecoming assembly.” She smirked, and Evie giggled.

“Howie’s so mean to that poor kid; I feel bad for him.” She shook her head in amusement, leaning her head against Maggie’s for a moment as Maggie burrowed into her shoulder the best she could as they strolled along.

“He’ll be alright, you know, he’s just embarrassed I caught him in the act,” Maggie mused, “I’m sure he’ll think twice before he does it, though. It’s not really my job to deal with that.” She rolled her eyes and Evie smiled as they approached the farms.

“Do you wanna come over for a little while? Mama’s made about a gallon of hot chocolate the last few days, it seems like, and we can sit and listen to the radio a while.” Evie’s expression was hopeful, and Maggie presented an answer in the form of a kiss to Evie’s cheek.

As they approached the front porch Evie strained to hear the familiar sounds of movement in the house; the creaks and groans of old wood, the twins and their raucous laughter echoing through various corners of their home, her brothers hollering about football games alongside their father. Instead, she was greeted with near silence and her stomach churned in response. She shared a glance with Maggie and bit at the corner of her lip as they hurried up the porch steps. They found both her family and Maggie’s

huddled in the den with various expressions of surprise and shock present on their faces. Evie's heart sank straight into her shoes and she opened her mouth to speak and found the words unwilling to escape her. She focused the brunt of her attention on the radio broadcast in time to hear the tail end of President Roosevelt's voice on the other side.

“... the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan...”

A loud, tinny ring sparked in Evie's ears, drowning out the sound of the radio until all she could hear was a continuous ring and the frantic pounding of her own heartbeat as Maggie gripped her fingers hard enough to bruise and she felt as though she might vomit on her mother's favorite rug if she was left to her own devices. Her eyes shifted across the faces in the room— to Tommy and Jack and the stark image of their dress uniforms as it imprinted itself behind her eyelids, to Maggie's brothers Jimmy, Harry and Danny and their severe expressions, full of fire and expectation of action, to her mother and father's horrified gazes at their sons, to Ben and Annie and their childish confusion.

Her breath caught in her chest and she struggled to inhale, her lungs rattling with the effort as she turned on her heel and rushed outside, vomiting into her mother's rose bushes just past the front porch. Evie retched, her stomach having run out of anything to offer up to the roses and instead allowed her the space to do nothing more than gag as her wheezing inhales wracked her entire body and her heart felt as though it was ready to burst out of her chest of its own volition.

So inexorable was Evie's focus that she hardly noticed the sound of someone else headed down the porch steps in her direction, and she started at the feeling of a hand on

her shoulder. She glanced over her shoulder and found Maggie standing behind her with an expression of such deep concern on her face that Evie nearly allowed a hysterical laugh to flutter out of her chest. Instead, she turned on her heel and wrapped her arms around Maggie in an embrace— underneath her panic she could feel an urge to fight, to make everything that had drawn them into the war pay for uprooting their lives, for threatening her family and everything she cared about in her own little corner of the world. As Maggie returned her embrace Evie dragged her racing thoughts through the motions of remembering where the recruiting center downtown was, how long it would take for her to arrange herself well enough to pass for a Prescott boy, and whether she could get away with what she wanted to do.

“What are we going to do?” Maggie whispered into the crook of Evie’s neck.

“I don’t know, Mags,” Evie replied, the lie thick on her tongue, “I don’t know.”

Chapter Two

The cool morning air felt all but grating against Maggie’s skin, and a shiver trickled down her spine as the cold seemed intent on settling into her bones through the thin sweater she’d slipped on before joining her mother for a trip into town nearly an hour before. Rationing had crept through Billings for the first two or three months of the new year, and with April in full swing Maggie had spent a rather enormous chunk of her free time with her mother attempting to calculate how much they could expect to receive through the coupons tucked into their ration books. It was a painstaking process, and one that Maggie often attempted to wriggle out of if her mother was feeling generous or Evie decided to pop by for a visit. Distractions were a much more appealing currency to her,

and she could count on Evie to deliver them in droves— their most recent and Maggie’s personal favorite distraction coming to life in the form of sneaking into the Mackenzie family barn to share kisses among the hay bales stacked in one corner.

A subconscious smile curled at Maggie’s lips as the memory of Evie’s newfound boldness the last time they’d been able to sneak away together bloomed in the back of her mind. Their conversations on the subject of their ever evolving relationship remained few and far between, but Maggie was almost certain that if she admitted her own feelings— feelings that had strayed so far past friendly that it had taken Maggie all of a month to admit to herself that she was very much in love with Evie Prescott— Evie would follow suit with her own admission shortly thereafter. Their relationship, as undefined as it was, was perhaps the most comforting thing Maggie had with the war looming over them and the days on the calendar hanging in the kitchen at home were being checked off one by one to bring them all closer to the day her brothers would leave for boot camp.

Something rough and sharp settled in her throat at the thought and Maggie allowed her gaze to drift to the store front and the shifting line of people ahead of them to distract herself from the anxiety that seemed to follow her every time she considered what exactly the war was going to mean for her family. Though her parents had been furious the moment she’d admitted that she felt as though she should be doing more with herself considering it seemed to her that every able-bodied man in Billings was enlisting— posters for factory jobs had sprung up downtown and her father had nearly had a conniption fit as soon as she’d admitted that she’d like to take one if she could. She wondered if they’d have such a problem with it if she wasn’t their only girl, and the jobs themselves had been in the state.

It made sense when she stopped to consider it logically that her parents wouldn't be thrilled by the idea of allowing their 'baby girl' to take a train to Washington and live in a new environment with strangers far removed from every bit of comfort and safety Billings had offered all of them.

It made sense and Maggie still couldn't help the sting of resentment that settled in her chest every time her father shut down her attempts to encourage their permission.

She would be eighteen by the end of the summer, and there was always a chance she could leave then. If the war was going to be over by Christmas, well, she wanted as much time as she could get to make a difference.

"Sweetheart, will you look and see whether we have coupons for butter?" Clara's voice was soft as she turned to look at her daughter and Maggie blinked slowly to pull herself from her meandering train of thought before she reached into her bag for their ration books.

"We have a few points left for butter; I think. It looks like they expire tomorrow, so we'll have to stock up for the week," Maggie replied, squinting at the coupons as she ran through the brief calculations in her head.

Clara hummed in response, and Maggie could all but see the gears in her mother's head shifting— they'd already begun to edit her recipes to include things that were far easier to obtain in the ration lines (though there had been an unfortunate incident in the process of attempting to make a fruit jello that Maggie quite keenly wanted to forget). Rationing was difficult for everyone if the sheer amount of time it took both the customers and the clerks to sort out who was allowed to purchase what was any indication, but Maggie had always excelled in the skills calculating the points and

amounts they could take for the week required and found the work quite easy to do in spite of the fact that she abhorred it.

“I suppose we’ll need to be creative with the biscuits this week, then, won’t we?”

Clara smiled down at Maggie as a laugh crept through the teenager’s lips.

“Maybe we won’t let Daddy taste test this time— he was partly responsible for the dreadful jello incident,” Maggie’s nose scrunched up in distaste, “But I think between the two of us we’ll be alright, Ma.”

“That’s my girl,” Clara nudged Maggie as they stepped into the general store on the tail end of the next group allowed in to shop. They’d spent an hour prior to their trip into town cataloguing exactly what they could buy without expending all their coupons for the week, and shopping was made easier after having taken the care to plan for it. Maggie ordinarily spent the time in the ration line alone, and her mother’s company made the experience more pleasant all around; at the very least it became that much easier to pass the time spent waiting around when she had someone to talk to and though Evie often volunteered to accompany her, working at the malt shop occasionally interrupted such plans.

The malt shop itself was a short walk from the grocer’s and Maggie found herself calculating how long it would take to hurry down there and meet Evie as she was leaving after her shift— they weren’t purchasing enough that her mother wouldn’t be able to take it back to their home without assistance and work on both their parts had kept Maggie from seeing Evie for several days. Their two-week lack of contact was an experience she hoped never to replicate, and she could admit, at least to herself, that as their relationship

shifted further and further towards something romantic she was addicted to Evie's presence.

"Ma?" She asked, lip drawn between her teeth as they approached the checkout counter.

"Yes, sweetheart?" Clara spared her a brief glance before she was smiling and chatting with Mrs. Andrews, the woman who tended to run the Andrews family business while her sons were off at school.

"Can I go meet Evie? She should be getting off work about now, and we haven't seen each other in a few days," Maggie explained, attempting to adopt her very best pleading expression for added effect.

There was a significant pause as Clara considered the request before she fixed Maggie's hair with a gentle hand and offered her a smile, "As long as you're home for dinner it's alright with me. Evie's more than welcome to tag along if she'd like to."

Maggie smiled and nodded, "Yes, ma'am, I'll let her know."

She hurried to hand the ration books to Mrs. Andrews before she turned on her heel and all but sprinted out of the grocer, a pang of excitement surging through her as she weaved in and out of the foot traffic on Main Street to several exasperated calls from the various elders that inhabited their sleepy Montana town. Maggie might have been abashed at the notion that she'd singlehandedly caused such a ruckus but the desire for Evie's presence seemed to have an innate ability to fog her mind over until it was the only thing she could focus on without going crazy. Her impromptu run came to an impromptu stop as she all but skidded to a halt half a block away from the malt shop to use the reflection in a nearby shop window to fix her hair and adjust her clothes and make

it seem as though she hadn't been earnestly eager to meet the girl who'd taken hold of her heart.

The door was already half open against someone's back as she approached and the feeling of warmth from the enclosed space alongside the raucous chatter of at least half of the teenagers in Billings by her count were both comforting. A brief glance confirmed that it wasn't Evie that was on their way out and Maggie slipped past them with a polite smile and a few casual greetings and even more casual goodbyes as she slid onto a stool at the counter and waited, with her chin in her hands, for Evie to emerge from the back. Her timing was far better than even she had counted on as it was only a minute or two after she'd settled down at the counter that Evie stepped out from the back in the process of arranging her thick auburn hair into a neat braid as she called goodbyes to several of the boys in the back.

Maggie felt her heart do a gentle stutter step in her chest as Evie's warm eyes drifted upwards to catch her gaze, and an elated smile spread across her face and revealed the dimple she had in one of her freckled cheeks. She was positive her own smile matched Evie's in eagerness and intensity, and she held out her hand for Evie to take as they pushed their way out of the shop into the ever present cold that seemed as though it might cling to Billings for an eternity if it had its way.

"You didn't tell me you were thinking of coming by," Evie announced when they'd made it to the edge of town.

She was always bolder when there weren't eyes on them, and though Maggie had taken slight offense to that months earlier, time had soothed her ruffled feathers and her innate understanding of her best friend had ensured, after much conversation on the

matter, that she had nothing at all to be offended about. Evie was a deeply private person when it came to relationships and in spite of Maggie's general desire not to feel obligated to hide who she was because of what other people might think of her she knew that she harbored an equally fierce desire not to hurt Evie by flaunting their relationship, such as it was, in any way that might bring harm to either of them. For as much as she adored her own family it wasn't a secret that they wouldn't accept her if she admitted the truth to them— she could practically feel the delicate cross resting on her chest burn at the notion that she might do anything to disappoint her family in the eyes of God.

A deep frown darkened her expression for several moments before a squeeze of her hand prompted Maggie to turn her gaze upwards to look at Evie whose brows were furrowed in quiet concern, "What's going on in that head of yours, Mags?"

Maggie shook her head and pressed a kiss to Evie's shoulder through her coat, "Nothing terribly important, I promise. And to answer your question - I can't surprise you all that well if I tell you when I'm coming," she replied, a teasing lilt to her bright voice.

A flush bloomed in the high points of Evie's cheeks as she mumbled something unintelligible in response and Maggie pressed a giggle into the shoulder of her coat as they walked. It felt as though it had been an eternity since they'd had the opportunity to be alone together, and Maggie found herself wondering how plausible it would be for the pair of them to sneak away to the barn on either of their farms in the pursuit of extending their time together.

"Mama and Pa aren't home at the moment, um..." Evie's voice was low and tentative, and Maggie canted her head towards her to catch every bit of the question that seemed to linger on her lips, "I don't... think anyone is home at the moment. Would

you— I mean, you don't have to but maybe we could—” Another pause. Evie's eyes screwed shut for a moment as the already present flush in her cheeks only seemed to deepen and a soft, adoring smile found its way to Maggie's lips.

“Go up to your room?” Maggie supplied, a giggle tumbling from her lips as Evie nodded and pressed a pale hand to her flushed cheek. Maggie reached for it with her own free hand and stood on her toes to press a kiss in the spot Evie's hand had previously occupied, her smile shifting towards something altogether more sultry than she could recognize herself, “Take me away, then, darling.”

Evie seemed to stutter to a halt all at once for a moment as she tripped over her own feet when they turned down the drive towards the Prescott's home; Maggie's presence at her side seemed to be the only thing to keep her upright as they walked and Maggie reached up to scratch at the back of Evie's neck in an attempt to soothe her as they approached the house. For as much as Evie complained that she felt altogether childish when it came to discussing the more intimate things they got up to when they were alone, Maggie found it nothing short of adorable that she had the power to fluster her best friend so thoroughly.

The house was still as they approached and Maggie felt a brief flash of anxiety ripple through her at the memory of their last approach under such circumstances - when the president's broadcast had changed everything for both of their families in the span of minutes. This silence was softer, somehow, gentle in its stillness and far removed from the silence that had been born of bated breath and lingering fear. It wasn't often that either of their homes were entirely empty but Maggie was willing to take advantage of

the opportunity to get Evie alone in one of their rooms as it was a far more comfortable endeavor than tucking themselves away in the hay lofts for extended periods of time.

Tucked away in the corner of the second floor landing on the Prescott's farmhouse was Evie's bedroom—the smallest among the several rooms that occupied the second floor, but private and all her own; something she never failed to express her delight with when their conversations strayed towards the subject. There was just enough space for her bed, a nightstand, and an armoire in the corner, but Evie adored it and did her best to decorate it with old photos or magazine clippings when she could get them. It wasn't much, but it was distinctly Evie and Maggie felt that that meant more than enough when it came down to it. They slipped into the room amidst quiet conversation—almost too low for the privacy that had enveloped them in their own perfect little bubble.

They hung up their jackets on the back of Evie's bedroom door in near silence, and Maggie fixed her gaze on Evie the moment the fabric had settled firmly against the hook that held it. Yet another blush roared into Evie's cheeks and Maggie smiled as she sauntered towards Evie, pushing her back towards the bed with every step in her direction. The backs of Evie's legs hit the mattress with a muffled thump, or perhaps it was the way she seemed incapable of doing more than sitting on the bed hard as her feet came out from under her. Evie's gaze was soft as it wandered across Maggie's skin and if anyone had asked her in the moment Maggie would have sworn that she felt it as much as she would have felt Evie's fingers against her.

Maggie reached up to hold Evie's face in her hands, a smile on her lips as Evie pressed a kiss into her palm that was full of affection. Evie's eyes slipped closed as Maggie carded her fingers through her hair and scratched at her scalp, taking note of the

soft, pleased noise that rumbled through Evie's throat. Her fingers settled on the back of Evie's neck after several moments and Maggie leaned in and claimed Evie's lips in a slow kiss—relishing in the high, pleased noise Evie made in response. Her own eyes slid closed as they kissed and the entire world seemed to fade out into a quiet static in which the only thing on her mind was Evie and exactly how long they could stay exactly where they were: sharing kisses and affection without fear or anxiety. It had never even occurred to Maggie that the Prescotts might return home earlier than Evie had planned, or that they would feel the need to check on her the moment they entered the house.

It had never occurred to her until Aggie Prescott's sharp, horrified gasp sounded in her ears like the crack of a rifle and Maggie was tumbling off Evie's lap and onto the bed as quickly as she possibly could. Earnest stood silent in the doorway and Maggie noted with mounting anxiety that his fists were clenched and shaking.

“Margaret. You will go back home this instant,” He rumbled, the piercing hazel eyes he'd passed on to his daughter wild and furious beneath his brow.

Maggie shrunk under the stare and even the presence of Evie's hand at the small of her back did little to comfort her—fear had coiled knots in her belly and the tightness was nearly sickening.

“Go, Mags. Please,” Evie's voice was hoarse and barely above a whisper; it sent a jolt through Maggie in the same moment tears sprang to her eyes angry and unbidden.

“Now, Margaret!” The Prescott patriarch's fist colliding with the door frame was enough to force Maggie into motion and she slipped past Evie's parents with her heart shattering its frantic beat into her ribs. She managed one final look at Evie over her shoulder.

Her heart clenched in time with the slow, sad smile that spread across her lover's face.

Billings, while not a town in which every single person could know one another, was not large or bustling or devoid of gossip; it was not unusual for stories to spread like wildfire when they were presented to the public in harsh whispers with sharp looks. It was not unusual for gossip to spread in Billings, and Maggie found herself wishing, not for the first time, that the news of her relationship with Evie would matriculate through town. A sick, savage desire had settled within her to feel the brunt of the disgust that would be visited upon her as thoroughly as she possibly could; it would be worth it somehow, she mused, to know that everyone in town viewed her as something despicable. As a figure in a story they might relish telling their children so as not to allow them to travel down the same path.

It would, she thought, be more preferred than sitting with her back pressed against her bedroom door listening to her mother read her scripture through the thick wood. The Prescotts had been family friends since long before Maggie's birth, and their relationship seemed only to have strengthened in their collective resolve to "cure" their daughters from the ailments that had forced them together in the first place. Her parents had known they'd been caught before she had set foot on their front porch. She remembered their faces: the cold eyes, the sharpness of their frowns, the disappointment that seemed to radiate from them with every breath they took. She remembered the feeling of her father's strong hand against the back of her neck, and the force with which he guided her to her bedroom. She remembered the click of the lock in her bedroom door and the

moments of silence that filled her space before her mother's tremulous voice slipped under the crack in the door and Maggie paused to listen to the sound of the old testament being read to her with fervor.

That had been nearly a week and a half ago.

Her parents had refused to allow her to leave her bedroom unless they knew exactly where she was going. If she had a shift at the library one of her brothers escorted her there and waited to walk her home when she was scheduled to end her shifts. It was a form of imprisonment Maggie had never expected, and the dull, listless voice in the back of her mind that assured her that she deserved such treatment seemed thrilled by the prospect of her having had all of her freedom stripped from her. Her days blurred together into a vague semblance of normalcy in which she saw no one other than those who frequented the library during her shifts, and her family. She had yet to be able to make eye contact with any one of them for more than a few short seconds at a time.

Another two weeks passed in that manner.

It was the most Maggie had ever been punished for anything in her life at present, and it stung so fiercely that when she paused to consider whether it was an unjust or undeserved punishment for simply having fallen in love, she was nearly brought to tears with the force of the emotion that washed over her. Her parents who had always been so proud of the things she chose to do with herself, and all of the qualities she had embraced as a person, seemed to harbor little more than anger and resentment and shame that she had turned out to be so despicable after all. There were days in which Maggie was inclined to believe them. Days in which she felt the strain of their broken relationship settle jagged in her bones, when she ached from the force of the emotions that rippled

through her every time her mother's choked voice wavered in her reading of the bible, every time her father's reminders that she had disappointed them floated through the oak panels that had shut her off from the world; on those days she felt she deserved every second of the torturous existence she'd built for herself.

Other days she felt ashamed that she had ever allowed herself to believe that falling in love with Evie had been wrong, as though she could control who her heart sought after at any point in her life. Other days she contemplated sneaking out of the window, finding Evie, and begging her to catch the train away from Billings— they could find a new home together if they wanted it enough, she was sure, and there had to be places in the world in which they could be happy.

Maggie had to believe those places existed. That her freedom, and her relationship with Evie could be maintained to its fullest extent if only they wished it so.

One month, one week and three days. Maggie counted the days in her journal with a scribbled calendar and hoped every day that she'd drum up the courage to run away. That her desire to be with Evie would win out against her desire to please her family, and she would finally be able to put herself into a position to be the most authentic version of herself she could be. Every day she allowed that courage to slip away was a day she went without seeing Evie, and the pain of her absence was all but excruciating.

A knock rattled her door as she scribbled out yet more thoughts on yet another day in her journal, and Maggie raised her head to wait for the appearance of one of her parents on the other side of the thick wood. Instead, the door swung open gently to reveal her brother Daniel, closest to her in age and perhaps the most sympathetic to her plight of anyone in their family. His eyes were soft as he closed the door behind him, and Maggie

felt her stomach swoop in response to the lack of animosity she found in her brother's gaze. An almost comical sense of relief washed over her at the thought that, at the very least, someone in her family still loved her in spite of what she could only assume they viewed as massive, irreparable flaws of character on her part.

"Hi, Danny," She murmured, fiddling with the edge of a page in her journal the moment their eye contact broke.

There was no response from him as he crossed the distance to her bed in two strides and settled down next to her with the creak of her bed against his weight the only sound in response.

"Hey, magpie," Danny greeted after a moment, tilting his head downwards and to the side to offer her a smile that prompted the sting of tears in her eyes in an instant.

It was a ridiculous thing to get emotional about, in her mind, but she'd spent a month with nearly her entire family addressing her as Margaret if they spoke to her at all, and the gentle reminder of her oldest nickname against her ear was enough to prompt a break down that in hindsight had been building since she'd been confined to her bedroom. She leaned into Daniel's side with a tense hesitance, fully prepared for him to jerk away or scold her for daring to touch him if she had yet to realize the breadth of sins she had to repent for before she could be allowed to fold back into their family with little fuss.

"Did you need something from me?" Maggie asked.

Her eyes darted towards Daniel's for a brief moment, and she held eye contact with him for a solid ten seconds before her gaze fell to the floorboards that peeked out from under the rug that spanned most of the floor in her bedroom. Daniel's shoulders rose

and fell in a deep breath, and he reached into his pocket after a moment to pass a wad of cash into Maggie's hands.

"I think you need to get out of here," Daniel admitted. He allowed his hand to linger against Maggie's for a moment as he folded her fingers over the money he'd pressed into her palm, "That should be enough for a train ticket almost anywhere. I've been savin' it for a while, but..." He paused, shrugging, "You need it more than I do, and I'll be in California soon, anyhow. I don't..." He trailed off and Maggie watched in silence as his jaw worked from side to side, as though he wasn't quite sure whether he ought to say exactly what he was thinking. "I love you, Mags. I don't want you to be stuck here with all this. I may not... understand, who you are, but I don't want you to hide that."

Maggie's hands trembled the moment Daniel closed her fingers around the money he was giving her, and the tears she'd been able to hold at bay slipped down her cheeks unbidden the moment he continued to speak. Her courage might have failed her one too many times already, but she had her brother and his kindness, and that alone felt as though it just might be enough to propel her through any difficulty she might face in the coming days.

"I told Momma and Daddy you're workin' tomorrow morning so you can't go to mass with us, and that I couldn't go either 'cause I got business to handle before we leave next week. I can take you to the train station, at least."

A strangled sob burst from Maggie's chest as she pressed her face into Daniel's shoulder and cried so hard, she was sure she'd soak the fabric of his shirt clean through before she settled down. Daniel's hand was light across her back as he half-embraced her

and allowed her, with all the patience and steadfast love he had exhibited as her brother, to cry until her sobs faded to hiccups and she found the strength to pull herself away from him and wipe at her eyes.

“I need to tell Evie,” She murmured after a moment, taking a deep, shuddering breath as she finished speaking.

Daniel gestured towards her journal with a broad sweep of his hand in the same moment he quirked his eyebrow, “Write her a note, then. I’ll find a way to get it to her before tomorrow, I promise.” A sort of boyish earnestness had softened his face, and Maggie watched him for a long moment before she managed a brief nod; part of her was still attempting to process that she might have the chance to run away with Evie after all. That despite the world’s best efforts to keep them apart their love would be enough to keep them together.

It was the stuff of fairy tales, in truth, and Maggie found it almost laughable that she might be capable of considering the last month of her life the lead-up to her own fairy tale ending. An ending in which the only thing she needed was Evie’s presence at her side to prove to herself that regardless of what happened, they would be happy if they were together. It was an intoxicating notion to consider and she found herself scribbling as brief a note to her lover as she could manage:

Dearest,

Danny’s taking me to the train station tomorrow morning to leave Billings for good. Pack a bag and meet me there when mass starts— we’ll leave together. There are factory jobs in Seattle, and I mean to go there. Please come with me.

All my love,

Maggie.

She ripped the page from her journal with still trembling fingers and folded it before she pressed it into Daniel's hand in the same moment, she leaned up to press a kiss to his stubbled cheek. Speech seemed to have failed her and she hoped that the gratitude she was feeling could be broadcast with such an intensity that her brother would be able to see how much his efforts meant to her. Daniel slipped the note into his pocket and pressed a kiss to the top of Maggie's head before he pushed himself to his feet and towards the door. He paused for a moment in front of it before he glanced at Maggie over his shoulder and offered her a smile, "I love you, kid."

"I love you too, Danny."

Dawn crept over the Mackenzie's farm far too slowly for its youngest inhabitant. Maggie had hardly been able to sleep with the coil of anxiety in her belly wound as tightly as it was as she'd tossed and turned in bed, and hoped that a wink of sleep might overtake her one way or another. She'd still found herself perched in front of her window as the sunrise began to creep over the hills that surrounded Billings, and the crow of their rooster cemented the waking of the rest of her family as they would soon prepare themselves to attend mass in town. She'd laid out her Sunday best for her excursion and wondered how furious her parents would be when Daniel told them she was gone.

Perhaps, a voice rasped in the back of her thoughts, they would not miss her at all.

A frown curled at the edges of Maggie's mouth as she cast the thoughts away with a sharp shake of her head. She glanced at the suitcase leaning against one of the posts of her bed and felt her stomach churn at the mere sight of the luggage and the

knowledge that it held what would soon become everything she had to her name. She had never disobeyed her parents during the course of her life up until that point; she refused to consider any of her relationships over the last several months to be disobedient in any way, as she would never consider doing anything that allowed her to follow her heart to be wrong in any capacity. The thought of leaving, for several reasons, was the one that struck an immense amount of terror through her heart. She would be disobeying her parents in leaving to work in one of the factories cropping up along the west coast, she would be spitting in the face of their love and their relationship with her by running away to be with a woman, she would, in essence, be casting aside her position as a member of the Mackenzie family in pursuit of genuine happiness away from them.

It was, in her mind, the only choice available to her and she still had yet to shake the undercurrent of anxiety that made her feel like she might pass out or throw up before she managed to do anything at all.

A rhythmic knock startled her out of her musings, and she pressed a hand to her chest to still her racing heart as Daniel peeked into the room and smiled.

“Everyone just left for town. Are you ready to go?” His voice was low and pointed, and she wondered how nervous he was about the prospect of assisting her in spiriting herself away to the great unknown, as it were.

“I’m ready.” She replied, slipping her shoes and her coat on in silence before she reached for her suitcase and followed Daniel out of their home.

Everything in her yearned to look back at the house as they strode down the dirt path to the main road, and she fought the urge with an almost Herculean strength. She had grown up in that house, and she had become a person she could be proud of within its

walls but it represented little more than the physical desire by her parents to keep her from the person who made her happier than anyone in the world. To stifle her until she settled into being someone she wasn't simply to please those around her. Maggie had never been the sort of person to cave in the face of anyone else's expectations, and the month in which she'd allowed her life to be dictated by the whims of her parents was one she would never be able to reclaim. It had strengthened her resolve in many ways, but she had only realized it when the opportunity to embrace her identity and fight for her own happiness had been placed in front of her.

The Mackenzie siblings passed the walk towards the train station in relative silence. Being less than a year apart had done wonders for their relationship, and Maggie had always felt that of her older brothers Danny was the one who understood her the most. They had no need to mark the trek with conversation, and although an undercurrent of nervousness seemed to spark between them Maggie had very little trouble understanding the fact that her brother seemed as eager to help her as she was to be free. The train station was nearly deserted as they approached, and Maggie spent several minutes talking herself into purchasing a ticket west before she managed to work up the courage to follow through with it. The train was scheduled to leave within the hour, and Maggie found herself clinging to the ticket as though it were the only thing keeping her alive and sane as they lingered on the platform.

"Maggie!" Evie's breathless voice behind her had Maggie turning on her heel so quickly she nearly tumbled into her brother's side before she steadied herself and gazed openly at a much different Evie than she'd left a month before.

Evie's hair was trimmed shorter than she'd ever seen it into a neat boy's cut that her brothers and several of the other boys in town had sported in an effort to maintain a length they thought might be suitable for basic training. She looked almost handsome in the morning light, and Maggie all but gaped at her for several moments before she watched Evie run her fingers through her hair in perhaps her most tell-tale sign of nerves. A smile slipped across Maggie's lips at the gesture and she dropped her suitcase to the ground at her feet in favor of stepping forward to embrace Evie the way she'd longed to do every day since they'd last seen one another. The dark flannel Evie wore smelled like a combination of pine trees and warm hay and Maggie allowed herself a brief moment to inhale the scent; it was a combination she'd always associated with Evie, and it was almost euphoric to be able to experience it again. Evie's arms wrapped around her, and Maggie paused a moment to note the sheer amount of strength in her grasp - it was a pleasant shift from the light touch of softness Evie had always carried in her body. There was something a bit harsher about her frame as they stood together, but it was still *her* Evie and Maggie was almost drunk on the feeling of being able to embrace her again. Several minutes passed before Maggie could bear to pull away from Evie enough to meet her gaze, and she leaned up on her toes to catch Evie's lips in a kiss before she found herself inspecting the area around them for any sign of Evie's luggage.

Her brow furrowed when she found nothing but her own suitcase around them, "Where are your things?" She asked, reaching up to hold Evie's face in her hands.

A brief quirk of her lips into an apologetic smile was Evie's only response for almost a minute before she cleared her throat, "I can't go with you, Mags."

Cold fingers of dread slipped between her ribs to grasp at her heart to the point where every beat of the muscle sent a sharp pain through her chest that she could only describe as grief in its purest form. “What do you mean you can’t go? Don’t you... I thought...” Maggie’s jaw clenched, “I thought you wanted to be together.” She managed, emotion already tightening her throat to the point of pain.

Evie’s eyes were so profoundly sad that Maggie found herself lost in them even as she registered Evie moving, and pulling a small leather book, almost the size of a wallet, from the back pocket of her trousers. She held it towards Maggie without a word, and Maggie reached for it with a furrow in her brow.

The book flipped open to reveal a photo of Evie on the center flap; her hair was shorn to a length just shorter than it was as Maggie glanced up at her once again before she returned her attention to the card. Evie’s jaw was set, and a quirk of her lips into a smirk at one corner was the only hint of emotion on her face. Maggie had to admit that she looked more like her brothers in the photo than she ever had in her life, and her confusion only mounted as she studied the rest of the small booklet. Fingerprints marked the right page, and the left was full of information on a Walter J. Prescott.

Realization crashed over Maggie with all of the intensity of a freight train and she felt a sob building in her chest as she shoved the booklet back into Evie’s hands with a furious shake of her head, “That can’t be real. I don’t— how could you—” Her throat tightened against the tears that were building in her eyes and Maggie stepped away from Evie with another shake of her head as her eyes clenched shut.

“I had to, Maggie. I— I couldn’t just stay here and do nothing! I wasn’t sure I’d make it through the door without someone finding out, but I did,” Evie admitted, her voice quiet and pained. “I did and I leave... for training tomorrow.”

Maggie wrapped her arms across her waist as though the gesture would hold her together in the moment she turned away from Evie with shaking shoulders and allowed the full scope of the emotions she was feeling to wash over her. Anger was the only one that found purchase in the moment she reached up to wipe her tears away and turned on her heel to look at Evie with unbridled fury in her gaze, “You weren’t even going to tell me, were you? You were just going to leave without saying anything to anyone? How could you—” She paused to shove at Evie’s shoulder, “—do that to *me*?!”

“Maggie, please. I—” Evie’s stammering protests were grating against her ears and Maggie shook her head as she shoved her index finger into Evie’s chest.

“*No*. I deserve better than that from you, Evelyn Prescott. I love you, and that should mean more to you than it does,” She ground out, her eyes bright and wild and pained beneath the mask of anger she’d pulled over herself for her own protection.

Evie reached for Maggie’s hand and held it even as she attempted to pull it away with a rough tug of her arm, “Maggie, *please*. I thought... I thought it would be easier if I could go without having to worry you,” Evie murmured. Her nose scrunched with distaste, “I should have known that wasn’t fair on you, and you’re right. You deserve so much more than that from me,” Her voice was soft, and the familiar rasp was almost enough to soothe Maggie into something that was at least slightly calmer than the fury that raged in her chest as she stood there with her hand in Evie’s.

“You could have told me,” Maggie said after a long moment of silence had stretched between them, “When you’d done it you could have told me. I may not have understood, and I still... don’t understand. I don’t want anything to happen to you and I don’t want to be without you.” It was the most forthcoming either of them had ever been with their feelings to that point, and Maggie could hardly juggle the emotions rushing through her with enough skill to recognize that they’d both admitted they loved each other and neither of them had batted an eye at the declarations.

“Nothing’s going to happen to me.” There was a note of confidence in Evie’s voice that gave Maggie pause as she tilted her head back to study her lover with keen eyes.

“You have no way of knowing that, Evie. There’s no way you can predict that. You’re going to war for Christ’s sake!” Her own voice was shrill, and Maggie forced herself to take a deep, slow breath. “If you don’t come home to me,” She started, “I’m going to be very, very upset with you.” Her eyes shifted to meet Evie’s, “Do you understand me?”

Evie’s smile was crooked and boyish in its exuberance and Maggie was struck by how perfectly her lover seemed to embody the very nature of any one of the Prescott boys with seemingly no trouble at all, “Yes, ma’am,” She replied, dropping Maggie’s hand to hold Maggie’s face between calloused hands, “I love you.” She punctuated the statement with a slow, deep kiss and Maggie felt herself melt into it with all the resistance of a wet slip of paper.

“I love you too,” Maggie muttered against Evie’s mouth before she pulled away and pressed her face into the juncture between Evie’s neck and shoulder and allowed her

lover to hold her for a moment. The whistle of the train approaching the station sent her heart rocketing up into her throat and she jerked away from Evie to turn and look at the behemoth of a machine approaching them. The conductor stepped off the train in a pressed navy-blue uniform, and Maggie watched him as he checked the pocket watch that had been tucked in the pocket of his vest. She felt rooted to the spot by Evie's presence at her side when the promise of freedom was staring her in the face, and she realized that despite her best efforts she would be facing said freedom alone. Bitterness settled on the back of her tongue with a sharp sourness, and Maggie swallowed to rid her mouth of the taste.

"It's time to go, Mags, come on," Evie urged her, nudging her towards the train with a brief hand against her shoulder.

"I don't want to leave you," Maggie said.

"You can always write me, and visit, even. If you want. I won't ever be far from you, I promise," Evie assured her, resting her forehead against Maggie's for a moment. She reached into the pocket of her trousers again and produced a slip of paper wrapped around a small photo of her in town with one of their friends from school, "You'll be able to send mail there for a little while, and... you know, if you have this you won't forget me for the first pretty girl you see in Seattle."

Maggie's laughter was strained as she accepted the parting gifts, "I will never forget you, you dolt. How could I? You're all I'll be able to think about."

Evie's smile was effervescent, "I just really wanted to get you to smile. I'll write you as much as I can, okay? I promise."

Maggie wrapped her arms around Evie's neck without another word and allowed herself to be held for as long as she could with the train's whistle rattling through any coherent thought she might have had the longer they stood there together. The clearing of a throat at their sides forced Maggie away from the embrace to find Danny standing with a newspaper tucked under his arm, and Maggie stepped forward to hug him.

"Don't forget to write to me too, magpie. Seattle doesn't know what they're gettin' themselves into with you," he teased, pressing a kiss to her forehead before he gestured to the train briefly, "They're gonna leave without you if you don't get a move on."

Maggie pulled away from him with a smile and paused for a moment to study her brother and Evie as they stood side by side, "I love you both very much." She announced, offering them a broad, adoring smile.

They met the smile with grins of their own and Maggie felt a pang in her chest at the sight. She would miss them both more than she felt capable of expressing, but they would never be far from her heart—it was impossible for her to consider a future that they wouldn't be in, and she resolved to believe they would make it home with every fiber of her being. The whistle sounded again, and Maggie turned away to step onto the train; everything in her wanted to turn around and stay with Evie and Danny but they would be away soon enough and Seattle held the promise of a freedom she'd never be able to find in Billings again. Her shoulders straightened and she raised her head as she walked through the nearest car to find a seat near the window through which she could still see the platform. Evie and Danny waved from the ground beneath the window she

settled herself next to, and she returned the gesture as the train began to pull away from the station.

Maggie's neck ached by the time she adjusted herself to study the scenery in front of her rather than the fading silhouettes of her brother and the love of her life. She exhaled and watched as her breath fogged the glass near her mouth. With her head pressed against the window she wondered what Seattle would be like: would the people there would be kinder than those in Billings? Would they even care about one young woman in a sea of faces? Would she be well and truly alone until the war was finished? There were no answers to her questions forthcoming in her mind, and she had no real desire for them to be answered with any degree of certainty. Seattle was a mystery, and in that mystery was a looming sense of adventure that Maggie had almost come to crave in the month she'd been confined to her bedroom.

It may not have been the perfect situation she'd imagined when she'd urged Evie to come with her, but it was her life, and she had never felt more content with her own ability to live it. At least Seattle would be hers, and she would give herself to the city gladly if it meant she could be anything at all.

Chapter Three

To my dearest family,

I hope this letter finds you well. I will be on the train to Georgia by the time you wake up, and I'm sorry I couldn't stay to say goodbye. I imagined you wouldn't understand my reasons for leaving, or what I managed to do, and I couldn't run the risk of being stopped before I could leave. I won't hold it against you if you're upset with me

- it must be a great shock to find this letter instead of me in my bed; and I suppose all I want you all to know is that I love you. If you love me, even a fraction, you will not try to stop me. You will not let anyone at all know who I really am.

I know it's a lot to ask of all of you, and I hope that nothing that's happened in the last month will have changed how much you love me. You can write me at the address I gave you if you want to. I'll write when I can. I don't know what else there is to say other than I love all of you very much, and I hope you can see how important this is to me. And how much I need to see it through.

All my love,

Evie

Scarlet paint gleamed in the early morning sunlight, and Evie studied the gold letters painted on the side of the train that would whisk her away from everything she'd known through her seventeen odd years of life to some place that was altogether new and altogether so full of mystery and possibility and a sort of abject terror that set her teeth on edge that she was half-amazed she hadn't fainted or something equally as embarrassing on her trek to her future in the form of the steam engine idling at the station. Emotion tightened her throat the moment the conductor stepped away from the train and called every passenger waiting to board— there were a small handful of boys from town with rucksacks and training orders clutched in their hands, older couples who seemed to be headed off on vacation, younger women with suitcases clasped in trembling hands—

each and every one of them were in a similar position to Evie it seemed; headed for some great somewhere that none of them seemed to know what to do with. She'd been thankful from the moment she settled down to wait at the station that none of the boys from town seemed to recognize her, and the subtle practice she'd done deepening her speaking voice until it felt more natural for the lower octave to escape her than her ordinary tone of speech had evidently done more to allow her ruse to work than she'd planned on.

They'd hardly batted an eye when she'd introduced herself and their conversation had continued along the same lines for several minutes as they'd covered where they were all headed, what branch of the military they planned to serve in, whether they had a girl or family waiting for them at home. They became such commonplace inquiries that Evie memorized her answers and could spout them off without much fuss one way or another— she'd been lucky so far that she didn't immediately recognize the boys from town and they seemed not to recognize her either; they accepted her stories and explanations without question and she felt perhaps the most confident in her fabricated life as she had thus far.

The conductor's second cry drew her from her thoughts, and she shifted the rucksack on her shoulder as she fell into step behind the last handful of passengers to make their way towards the train. She wondered how many of them would still be there when she reached her destination, and imagined what they would do and where they might be headed in the endless moments before her shoes hit the metal steps onto the train and her breath caught in her chest as soon as they had.

Was she about to do this? Was she really going to leave her entire family behind to rush headfirst into a situation that could get her killed more ways than she could even

conceptualize at one time? Was she even capable of handling basic training? Of handling combat?

The doubts swirled in the back of her mind with such an intensity that she felt almost ill from the force of it all, and she managed little more than a rough swallow for several seconds as her breath held itself in the middle of her chest without allowing her to exhale. Her head swam with static, and a pressure built in her chest and the back of her head in equal measure until she sucked in a desperate gasp to give her aching lungs even a modicum of relief, her gaze darting around wildly to catch a pair of vibrant blue, visibly concerned eyes gazing back at her.

“Everything okay?” The stranger asked, and the low, easy timbre of his voice was more than enough to soothe Evie’s nerves.

She had never had much of a gift in the way of description, but she had a sudden, borderline hysterical thought that the unfamiliar man had a voice that felt like a physical manifestation of a warm blanket. Something that was inherently comforting in all its tones.

She managed a nod in lieu of a verbal response, and noted the furrow settling between the man’s dark blond brows deepening by the second the longer she went without speaking. She inhaled slowly, only managing a full breath after several failed attempts before she felt her hands cease their trembling and her head felt clearer than it had a few moments before.

“I’m nervous as all hell,” She admitted in the quiet rock salt rasp she had attempted to perfect in the time before her deployment.

The blond man smiled: a warm, easy thing and she wondered if he was always so calm— if he would remain calm when they were knee deep in the muck in Europe or Africa or wherever it was that they would be rushing off to.

“Never been away from home?” He asked, gesturing to the seat next to him with an encouraging tilt of his head.

“Once or twice. We um— we went to Bozeman once to um... to buy a pig, but otherwise? I’ve never been anywhere else,” She admitted, a flush blooming in her cheeks as she spoke. She had never paused to consider how little of the world she actually understood; her corner of the world was small, and she had been content to remain there and build her life as best she could without ever being expected to stretch herself beyond the bounds of the safety and familiarity of her childhood home and everything that had shaped her into the determined albeit naive young woman she was as she slid into a seat next to the kind man at her side.

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

He let a low whistle escape him and reached out to grip Evie’s shoulder in what she imagined was meant to be a reassuring gesture; it reassured her to an extent, but she couldn’t help the way her heart kicked into a gallop in her chest, somehow convinced she’d be found out if the stranger noticed the slimness of her shoulders in spite of every effort she’d made to make them appear broader and more like her brothers’.

“I’m not all that surprised to hear that, then. That you haven’t been to many places yet, I mean. You from Billings? Or did you just catch the train there?” He asked, a curious expression plain on his features.

“I grew up there. My family’s lived there for as long as I can remember. Mama and Pa grew up there too, so…” She shrugged, as though that explained all she needed it to without another word and the brief nod she earned from the stranger was more than enough to confirm that notion.

“I grew up in Helena. So, looks like we gotta stick together, y’know, as Montana boys,” The man’s smile was crooked and broad, and Evie found herself smiling in return from the sheer warmth that seemed to radiate from him.

“That sounds like a plan to me,” She replied, holding out her hand after a moment of hesitation, “I’m Walter. You can call me Wally if ya want, most people do.”

The blond man took her hand and Evie tightened her grip enough to give his hand a strong shake before they pulled away, “I’m Fred. Most folks call me Freddy, so you’re welcome to do the same. We’re gonna be pals now anyhow, so you might as well.”

The ease with which Freddy spoke was almost comical and Evie had a brief image of a cowboy off in the countryside, operating on his own time in his own ways with little care at all how the rest of the world thought he might need to act. There was a certain grace in the ease with which the other man carried himself, and Evie found herself comforted by the steadiness of his presence. She had imagined she wouldn’t bond with anyone at all— that she would be too different, or too small, or too scrawny and for one of those reasons or a host of others she might be ostracized from the rest of the men she’d be tied to through service.

The knowledge that at the very least she’d met one singular person who seemed willing to be her friend and brother-in-arms in spite of any inherent difference or scrawniness was so relieving that she could have laughed from the feeling alone.

“Are you headed down to Georgia?” Evie asked after a moment, soothed by the rocking of the train to a near doze. Her anxiety at the prospect of boarding the train and being found out had slowly begun to fade and the dregs of adrenaline in her system that had come alongside it were following a similar path.

Freddy hummed in confirmation and Evie’s eyes flickered towards his face for a split second before his eyes drifted towards hers and he offered her a smile, “I am, yeah. Headed for the paratroopers— you know anything about them?” He asked, a pale brow raised in question.

Excitement thrummed through Evie, though it wasn’t enough to rid the comfortable haze of near-sleep from her bones, “Fella talked me into signing up with them when I went to the recruitment office. They get paid more; did they tell you that? Figured it couldn’t hurt. Plus, I’ve never been on an airplane before. I thought it might be fun.”

Freddy’s laugh was as low and rumbling as his voice, it seemed to roll up from his belly and out into the world and Evie found the sound even more comforting than his voice alone, “I flew a crop duster on my uncle’s farm once and it scared the shit out of me,” He admitted, his voice catching for a moment in a genuine snort of laughter, “I figured the air force wasn’t for me after that, and jumpin’ out of a plane’s probably easier than flyin’ one so I thought it couldn’t hurt. No one’s ever done nothin’ like this before either, so that’s something, isn’t it?” Excitement had brightened his eyes to a nearly impossible shade of blue, and Evie’s gaze darted between the open sky outside of the train window and Freddy’s gaze as if she were attempting to compare the two. To quantify the color of his eyes against something familiar.

“It sure is somethin’,” Evie agreed with a brief nod of her head. She hadn’t considered it in those terms but if joining the military had been a planned adventure, then joining the paratroopers had been one that had taken her by surprise. She had no expectations and no knowledge of what the experience might be like and as terrifying as that was, it was almost freeing to know that no one else would either. That she would learn alongside men who were just as in the dark as she was, that they would all find their footing together. Those sorts of things bonded people in ways that were difficult to explain, and Evie felt a deep need for that connection; for the knowledge that she would walk away from training with people she could call her brothers, people who would come to share an experience with her that no one outside of them would ever be able to understand.

“You look like you’re ready to sleep for a week, kid,” There was a teasing lilt to Freddy’s slow drawl that hadn’t been present in their earlier conversation, and Evie managed to do little more than offer him a slow hum of affirmation in the long moment before her eyes fluttered open and she fixed her gaze on him with her eyes half closed against her creeping tiredness and the sun shining through the window at their sides.

“You ever get so excited about somethin’ that as soon as it starts happening everything just kinda... falls right outta you?” She asked, reaching up to rub at her eyes with half a hope that it might revive her in some way. It seemed unlikely the longer she sat there basking in the combination of sunlight and Freddy’s warmth with the train rocking the pair of them into a state of relaxation that had her feeling boneless the more she allowed herself to succumb to it.

“I got that way the first time I ever rode a bull in a show back home,” Freddy mused, “I thought I was gonna pass out when the whole thing was through, so, I suppose I know exactly what that feels like.” Amusement brightened the low tones of his voice, and Evie found herself smiling along even as her eyes slipped closed and the urge to sleep threatened to overtake her entirely.

“Get a bit of rest, huh? We’ll be on this train for at least the next day or two, I figure, and you ain’t gonna be any good to anyone if you can’t keep your eyes open by the time we get there.”

It seemed to be the most sage advice Evie had ever received from anyone at all, and the sluggish pace of her thoughts and higher function seemed to take Freddy’s comments as permission to allow her to slump in the bench seat they were sharing and slip into unconsciousness with an ease she hadn’t experienced in weeks.

“— kid’s gonna stay asleep until we get there?”

Evie stirred for a moment at the sound of an unfamiliar voice and in the suspended space between complete alertness and the dregs of sleep that seemed determined to cling to her she shifted in her seat and wondered just how long she’d been unconscious. Her eyelids fluttered several times in order to open properly, and her jaw cracked and creaked like an old fence as a yawn overtook her. She reached up to rub the sleep from her eyes before her gaze focused on a pair of strangers sitting across from them on the train watching her with expressions that shifted between curiosity and open amusement.

“You hangin’ in there, kid?” One of the men asked. The smile on his face revealed a dimple in one of his cheeks and his blue eyes were almost a vibrant enough shade to match Freddy’s — a feat she wouldn’t have found possible a handful of hours prior. His hair was neat and immaculately combed, and Evie was reminded of the Superman comics Ben had tucked into his bookshelf at home. A modern-day Clark Kent was sitting in front of her, and she hardly had the higher brain function to process it in the slightest.

A weak grumble of confirmation was the best she could offer him as her thoughts jogged to encourage her sluggish, sleep addled mind into something that resembled coherence. She pressed the heel of her hand into one of her eyes and shifted to pull herself into a proper upright position. The early morning sunlight had drifted towards an oppressive heat the further south they had traveled and when her eyes fluttered open to spare a proper glance towards the window and found glaring sunlight across open plains she couldn’t help the annoyed groan that rippled through her.

“I’m alright,” She croaked, her voice harsh against her own ears.

Clark Kent, as Evie had been identifying him in her thoughts, offered her a broad, dimpled smile and rapped his knuckles against the armrest between his seat and the seat occupied by his companion who had been silent and looked about as young and nervous as Evie herself must have in the eyes of the men that had filtered into the space around them.

“I’m Charlie,” The Clark Kent look alike offered, his grin a touch mischievous in its slant and presence. He reminded her of Puck from the Shakespeare plays she’d read in high school in that moment, and she reminded herself that he’d given her a name to call

him rather than continuing to use the halfcocked comparisons that sprang to mind every time she paused to consider who it was he reminded her of.

“Wally,” She supplied, matching his smile with a more subdued one of her own.

“This is Henry,” Charlie announced, clapping the younger man on the shoulder with a fraternal sort of affection that Evie couldn’t help but appreciate even as Charlie cupped a hand around his own mouth as if he were preparing to share deep secrets with them and in a conspiratorial whisper continued, “He’s real shy, I wouldn’t take it personal.”

Henry’s pale, freckled cheeks bloomed with color, and Charlie winced the moment the younger man’s elbow drove itself sharply into his side, “Shut up, Charlie,” He grumbled, embarrassment making the mellow tones of his voice shrill for a fraction of a second.

A smile curled at Evie’s mouth at the sight, and she felt a fierce pang of longing for her brothers well up in her chest and settle there, painful in its insistence for the brief moment it lingered. It faded as quickly as it had come upon her, and she focused her attention on Henry long enough to hold her hand out for him to shake, a lopsided smile spread across her lips in invitation and genuine cheer. Henry seemed to take a measure of comfort in the gesture regardless of the fact that he only met her eyes for two or three seconds before he took her hand and shook it far more firmly than she’d been expecting. His shoulders were hunched with every movement as though he were determined to keep them up around his ears as an added buffer from the reality of the world around him. He reminded her of the fawns who wandered through the woods outside of Billings on occasion - nervous, and bashful, and altogether too gentle for the world to have sunk its

teeth into them as ferociously as it was wont to do when given even the barest sliver of opportunity.

Though she herself had difficulty remembering what she'd been like in the short time before Maggie's presence in her life had softened all of the quiet places in her that had been keen on demurring in the face of the world at large she felt a ripple of empathy flood through her the longer she allowed her gaze to settle on Henry's slouched form in the seat across from her. She had been sleeping when they'd arrived and found herself distracted by thoughts of what Henry might be like when time had made them acquaintances, or training had gone so far as to make them friends. His shyness was endearing in a way she hadn't expected, and the thought that any boy who seemed to want to avoid the world around him was so willing to throw himself head first into danger and violence for the sake of the people he could protect by doing so was nothing short of valiant to Evie.

She wasn't sure she had the heart to ask Henry outright how he felt about the war or his place in it or what he hoped he might achieve on the off chance any of them actually made it through basic training.

Hell, she wasn't sure *she* knew how she was feeling about the war or her place in it or what she would do if she could last more than a full week without exposing herself to danger and punishment by being found out in the midst of her ruse. The hint of the thought as it crept along the edges of her conscious mind was enough to prompt a sharp sour taste on the back of her tongue that she found herself all too eager to get rid of as quickly as possible. She rooted around in her rucksack for the canteen she'd shoved in at the bottom before her clothes had been haphazardly layered atop it and left to settle

during her short journey to the train station, and now her much longer journey occupying the train itself. Murmured conversation flowed around her, and she listened to it half-heartedly. Enough to interject with hums of approval or disapproval when they were warranted, or nods of confirmation or rejection when those were required of her. Finding her canteen at the bottom of her bag earned a borderline elated rumble in the form of a husky laugh, and she drained the container dry in her haste to flush away the physical remnants of doubt that clung to her tongue.

“Jesus Christ, kid, slow down!” Charlie’s voice was rough with laughter, and Evie only processed the comment when she pulled the canteen away from her lips and found it empty.

Heat flooded through her cheeks, and her nails rattled the empty metal of the canteen as they rapped against it. She bowed her head for a moment before she felt Freddy nudge her side and her eyes darted up to catch his; his gaze was warm and more than a little amused, and she realized all at once that they were teasing her more than they were ridiculing her or her apparent ravenous need for every ounce of water she had contained in anything on her person.

“Sorry,” She mumbled, rubbing the flush away from her cheek with an idle hand, “Must be the uh, the heat in here or somethin’.” It was a poor excuse, but one that her newfound companions seemed to accept without much fuss one way or another if the ease with which they settled back into conversation was anything to go by. It was a relief not to be scrutinized or harped on for her behavior in any capacity, and she entertained the idea that she might have the sheer dumb luck to be assigned to a squad or platoon or battalion in which the three men around her might be a presence for her to lean on. They

knew nothing of each other past their first names or hometowns or whether they had anyone waiting for them at home, but none of that seemed to matter to any of them.

Why would it? Why *should* it? She couldn't bring herself to fret about what any of them had done before the war had crashed upon them; she cared about what it had led them towards, cared that it had nudged them all towards a passenger train headed to Georgia full of expectant boys and men brimming with promise and bravado and eagerness to prove themselves to a country that seemed to have yet to decide whether they wanted to prove anything to the world at all.

There was a freedom in the anonymity she had with them that she wasn't willing to relinquish without a fight. As far as they were concerned she was seventeen year old Wally Prescott of Billings, Montana; a farm boy who'd grown up with two older brothers to follow in the shadows of, two younger siblings to teach the ways of the world to, and a girl who wasn't back home anymore but held his heart as thoroughly as anyone in the world ever had. To them she ceased to be Evelyn Virginia Prescott: a farm girl from Billings who had never had any expectations about what her life would be; who up until a handful of months before had spent most of her time assuming that nothing she wanted in her heart was right or proper or appropriate, and she was going to be doomed to a life of stagnation and unhappiness the likes of which she would never be able to understand until it was bearing down on her in the form of a husband, and children and a picket fence and a dream she'd never had for herself.

Relief sent a tremulous shuddering through her shoulders. She wouldn't ever have the ability to be just Evie around the men she hoped to call friends, but she could be a different, and perhaps better version of herself under the guise of being Wally. It was a

complicated notion, and not one she'd ever paused to consider in the frantic months she'd spent preparing herself for the eventuality that she would never in a million years make it further than the recruitment office downtown. She'd imagined every possible way she could be caught in the process of earning her identification and being properly recruited and somehow she'd skated through every requirement with an ease that might've been laughable if she hadn't been terrified by every near miss the process had offered her.

She hadn't expected to get here for even a moment, and hadn't taken the time to allow herself to rejoice or revel in it until she was explaining it all to Maggie in a hushed, heated voice that had brimmed with too much pride, and too much excitement and evidently angered Maggie far more than she'd ever planned. Regret tightened painfully in her stomach at the thought, and she made a mental note to write to Maggie as soon as she was able; not, of course, that she had any real way of sending anything she wanted to say three quarters of the way across the country to an address she didn't have while Maggie found her footing in Seattle. With all of her frantic preparations and the last month of her life in Billings prior to boarding the train that morning Evie had thought about Maggie constantly; she'd imagined sneaking onto the Mackenzie's farm and scaling the ivy wall that had rested under Maggie's bedroom window as long as they'd been alive. She'd imagined sneaking hours with her under the cover of the cool nights that had spread across town with a promise they'd not held when she had been capable of seeing Maggie every time she felt even the slightest urge to do so.

Her imagination, in the end, hadn't been enough to encourage her to do any of those things when her focus had been inexorably drawn to committing to and following through with the charade she had begun to craft around herself with the utmost care. Her

stomach tightened again and she shifted in her seat against the guilt and the undercurrent of shame that very nearly sent bile rocketing up into the back of her throat. She'd missed Maggie terribly in the time they hadn't been able to see one another but the thought that anything else in the world could have made her forget about that, or ignore the suffering Maggie must have been enduring because of her was enough to force tears into her eyes. It was a train of thought she hadn't planned on revisiting in the company of anyone at all, let alone the company of men who would arguably find something to ridicule if she did something as unfortunate as cried in front of them. She settled for a rough snuffle and a quick pass of her fingers against her watering eyes; she could pass it off as allergies if she wanted it badly enough and she returned to her rucksack to retrieve the small journal she'd bought at the corner store on her way to the station that morning. It had cost a full dollar of the pocket money she'd been saving since the harvest the year prior, and she hadn't been entirely sure why she'd wanted it when she'd added it to a small pile of snacks she hadn't really wanted to eat but heard her mother's voice urging her to take care of herself somewhere in the back of her mind and gathered into her arms regardless.

She returned her attention to the men around her for a moment as if to judge how much privacy she might have if she paused to write a letter for Maggie and found Freddy listening patiently to Charlie regaling him with tales that seemed to center on all of the girls who'd been eager to go out with him in the time between his registering for the army and leaving for war. Henry was quietly reading what she could only assume was a Western novel as she squinted at the cover and found *The Ox-Bow Incident* staring back at her in large font at the bottom. Satisfied by their current level of occupation she turned

her attention to the blank page of her journal and drew her bottom lip between her teeth, rolling her lip between them for a moment in consideration before she began to write.

My Dearest Maggie,

I find myself missing you desperately somewhere around Kansas. I'm not entirely sure how long I've been on the train, but I have managed to make a small handful of friends and that has taken some of the panic out of traveling alone. You've always been much braver than I have, so I imagine you've made countless friends already on your way to Seattle. I hope you'll write to me as soon as you settle in there, but if you're still sore about the way our last conversation went I would understand.

I reckon none of what I'm doing makes any sense to anyone at all but me, and I wish I'd had more time to explain it to you. To really make you understand why I have to do this. I don't ever expect you to, of course, and I would never push that on you if you've decided between Billings and Seattle that you can't wait for me if I might never come back. I want you to be happy in whatever ways you can be, and if that isn't with me then it isn't.

I suppose I simply wanted to remind you that I love you, with everything I am and everything I'm ever going to be. I don't think I'll ever stop. If I'm here in this life for three years or fifty years longer, you will always be the first person I've ever given myself to fully. It may not mean much now, and you're welcome to be angry with me

until I come home. But I hope you won't be. And I hope I might have a chance to see you again before we go off anywhere at all.

The possibility of coming home to you is, I imagine, what's going to get me through this.

Yours always,

Wally

“What're you doin' over there?” Charlie's voice broke through the relative focus she'd managed to maintain during the process of crafting a letter to Maggie that was as honest as she'd wanted to be when they'd parted.

Evie glanced up briefly between Charlie and her journal before she offered him a brief smile, “Writing a letter,” She answered, holding the journal up to emphasize the point.

Charlie wagged his eyebrows and offered her a rakish grin as he pushed himself up from his seat presumably to catch a glimpse of the letter itself. Evie pressed the journal to her chest with a half hearted glare and Charlie held his hands up in a peaceful gesture before he lowered himself back into a sitting position, “Easy, kid. You writin' your girl, or what?”

A flush bloomed in Evie's cheeks almost immediately and Charlie's laughter seemed to echo around the train in its intensity even before she muttered something in awkward confirmation.

Amusement flickered to life in Charlie's features and Evie felt her own face warm in increments until the tips of her ears began to sting from the force of the blush she could feel spreading down into her chest. “We had a fight before I left...” She admitted. Her

voice was soft— weak and full of regret and pain as it passed her lips. In spite of the fact that she felt reasonably confident that Maggie would forgive her at some point in the next few months, it still ached to know that their last conversation, though it had contained their first admissions of love for one another, had been fraught with tension and anger and the heartbreak she had succeeded in imposing on the woman she considered to be the love of her life.

“I suppose I was trying to make it easier on her? I didn’t tell her I was leaving until the day before. She was going to Seattle on the train and I—” Evie paused, a rough exhale punctuating her aborted statement. “Well, I told her I couldn’t go with her like we planned to do. I was stupid.”

Charlie’s face was soft with sympathy and he rose from his seat to reach out and ruffle Evie’s hair in the way her brothers so often had when they were children and their attempts at comfort when she was upset had been earnest but more than a little awkward and more than a little uncertain. “But you’re writing to her anyway? You must be real sweet on her,” He replied. There was no judgement in the tone of his voice; no sign that he found Evie’s devotion to a girl he might believe wouldn’t return such feelings ridiculous in any way. It provided her with a strange sort of comfort to know that in the short time she had been in Charlie’s presence he had proven himself to be an ultimately good man. One with a mischievous streak, to be sure, but a good man nonetheless.

“I’ve loved her since I was a kid,” Evie informed him, “Until she tells me she’s done I don’t wanna let her go.”

Charlie nodded slowly in response, and Freddy nudged her in the side to catch her gaze and offer her a smile, “You’re a sweet kid, Wally. I’m sure whatever fight ya’ll had

won't matter much if ya'll love each other the way you're saying you do. Keep your chin up, okay?"

Evie nodded, a smile curving across her lips slowly. Her father had never been an overtly emotional man— she knew, logically, that he loved his children and he loved her mother and there were things in life that brought him genuine joy: working with the horses on their farm, cheering along to football games on the radio with her brothers, slow dancing in the kitchen with Aggie wrapped in his arms. Her brothers expressed their emotions genuinely, but there were certain things they kept to themselves; she could not recall having more than a few conversations with them about how much they loved the women they were with in spite of the fact that Jack was married and Tommy had been well on his way to marrying his girlfriend by the time the war had been declared and he had been forced to prepare to leave everything behind. It was difficult for her to rein in her own emotions; it was difficult for her to ignore the urge to share them with the people around her, and she wondered, in an absent, nebulous sense, if that would be something that blew a hole in her charade a mile wide.

Everything she had done to present herself as a man would mean very little if she could not get a grasp on acting as though she were one. How was she meant to change such a crucial part of herself in such a short time? None of the men around her seemed to mind it, and for that alone she was relieved— but she knew they would be exceptions to the rule. She knew that other men would jeer and tease her mercilessly, and she knew it would be difficult for her to handle when she had such a tenuous grasp on her identity as it was being shaped with every passing moment she leaned into it.

“I will,” She said after a long moment. Her eyes drifted to the scenery passing them by and she wondered just how long they would be confined to the train car they had found themselves in. She couldn’t quite remember how long the journey was meant to take— only that their destination was Camp Toccoa, Georgia and it was the first time she had ever been outside of Montana and Georgia seemed to be an entirely different world in her mind.

“Any of you know how long the train ride is?” She asked, her gaze shifting from the window to meet Freddy’s gaze and dart to Charlie’s in short order. Henry was absorbed in his book, and Evie did not have the heart to interrupt his reading when he seemed so engrossed. She wondered if it was the only thing keeping him calm in the presence of near strangers— if she had not been so distracted by her own need to speak and fill any potential silences she might have joined him in reading to pass the time.

“A couple of days, I think?” Charlie’s broad shoulders lifted their way through a shrug. “I’ve been on the train so long at this point it’s all starting to blur together. We’ll get there when we get there, kid. I hope you brought something to entertain yourself with.”

Evie huffed out a laugh, “I think you’ll be entertaining enough to make the trip go by pretty quick, Charlie.”

The other man’s laugh was bright and booming, “Damn right I will! You guys are alright, you know? Here’s hoping we get to stick together when we get to camp.”

Freddy nodded firmly, a dimpled smile on his face, “Here’s hoping.”