

Bella

A pixie cut.

That's what the nurse just called it. The nurse, with her long, long ponytail.

Slowly, tentatively, I run a hand over my head. Over what feels like my *scalp*.

I'd cry if it didn't hurt so much just to breathe.

"I always wished I could pull off short hair," she blathers on. "But you've got the bone structure for a pixie."

A pixie. The name doesn't even make sense. Pixies, fairies, whatever—they never actually have short hair. I think of all the princess stuff in my bedroom back at Gram's, the Barbies and dollar-store picture books. Long hair, always.

And this isn't a pixie cut, anyway. A pixie cut gets done in a beauty parlor. Not the back of an ambulance.

I find my voice. "Can I go yet?"

The emergency department at London Valley Memorial smells like barf and bleach. The lights make

everything look green and the curtains they have between beds don't give anyone any privacy.

Not that I've had any privacy for a while.

The nurse pretends not to hear me. Or maybe she actually doesn't. It's definitely loud enough in here.

"Five-eleven." She blinks at my chart and does a low whistle. "God, I'd love to be that tall."

She pauses. Like I'm supposed to congratulate her on being jealous of me. For something I have no control over.

"And you're so *skinny*, too!"

I feel like nurses aren't supposed to say that. But this is a shitty hospital and she's probably a shitty nurse.

"You could model, you know."

That.

Icepick. Stomach.

I can't say anything, I can't react, I can't cry because I can't even get enough air.

So I just ball up the blanket harder in my fist. Keep staring at the ceiling. At the ugly green light. Like it's the morning star.

"Okay, then." The nurse mutters it in a way that I'm not sure I'm supposed to hear. "Well, I am sorry about the wait." She doesn't sound sorry. "The physician will be with you as soon as possible, but I should warn you, we are *very* busy tonight."

She doesn't need to warn me. I saw the waiting room. I can hear all the stretchers banging in down the hall.

“Any new or increased pain since we checked you in?”

I shake my head.

“Okay. If you feel sharp pain or feel like you’re losing consciousness—”

“Can I at least take this off?” I don’t even know what it’s called. I just know I can barely breathe.

She smiles. Like I’m stupid for not knowing what the beige plastic-and-velcro thing smashing down my chest is called. “The support binder,” she says. “The physician will go over all of that when he arrives.”

When he arrives.

He.

“Okay, but...” My voice sounds craggy. I swallow. “Can you, like, ballpark it?”

“Unfortunately, I’m not able to speculate about treatment, diagnosis, or recovery times.” She sounds all smug about it. I bet she was a mean girl in high school. “You did sustain some severe injuries to the ribs and sternum and for the time being it’s very important that the fractures remain stabilized.”

She’s got on pink scrubs. A pink headband. That long, long ponytail.

“If you want, you can ask the physician when he —”

Never fucking mind. I close my eyes and sink into the pillow. I’m trying to tune things out, when—

“Someone called for victim’s advocate?” The charge nurse, the one that barks everything she says. “LVPD actually sent someone for once.”

I open my eyes again.

No answer. Then the charge nurse again.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you, honey. It's Friday fucking night in the Valley and this is the emergency department. Everyone here's a victim of something. You got a name, or anything?"

You bitch. You murdering bitch.

You fucking killed him.

I am gonna drag your skinny ass in on murder charges. Make no mistake, I am going to get the fucking cops in here and—

Headrush when I stand up. I grab my sweatshirt from the chair. There's enough people walking back and forth that I make it to the end of the hall.

"Bella?"

Nurse Chelsea. I think fast. "Ladies' room?"

She relaxes a little. I'm not here to bother her. "Around the corner."

She points. I walk.

I'm not going to the ladies' room. I don't turn the corner at all, but she doesn't notice or doesn't care. Instead I keep going straight, straight on to the waiting room, to the sliding glass doors, to the outside.

The parking lot's dark. London Valley never gets cold, not really, but when the sun goes down there's a chill in the air, like the blue of the sky is freezing downward to earth.

I look up. Look up and take as deep a breath as I can under this stupid binder.

There's stars out.

Bella

Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight...
The nursery rhyme goes off in my head, automatic.
Stupid.
Grow up, Bella, I tell myself. Grow the fuck up.
And then I run.

Tink

Ten months later

“Suck my diiiiiiiick!”

The voice trails back to me from the bike ahead as it whips between cars down the 303. I grimace, rev, and follow.

Pan’s such an asshole.

“Oh, *very* mature,” someone mutters into the mic. Kit, I think, but maybe Fox—I suck at telling them apart by voice. Doesn’t matter. I say nothing, just focus on gunning it down the asphalt and not getting blinded by the late-afternoon sun.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” crackles a reply. Pan. Wherever he went ahead of us, fastest as ever.

“Yeah, and you’re one to fucking talk, Fox.” *That’s* Kit. I skim past a pickup and take over the lane. The dusty green expanse of the valley stretches hot and dry to my right as I lean into the curve.

“Aw, I’m plenty mature.” Fox. “Someone back me up.”

“No.” That’s Blue.

“I see that and raise you a *hell* no.” Pan.

Fox sighs. “Tink?”

The glare’s torching me in the eyes and I’m sweating under my road jacket besides. I don’t really care, though.

I’m happy.

I rev the throttle. “I’m with Pan.”

Another sigh. “Fuck all of you,” Fox mutters.

“Hard pass.” Pan guns it. “Last one there’s buying!”

Fox is the last one there.

“Sixty-six eighty-three.” The Fill-R-Up girl tosses her ponytail as she rings up the tallboys. The A/C is weak, the air smells like taquitos and sounds like bro-country, and I’ve got my hands in my pockets, studying a rack of air fresheners.

“Aw, for real?” Fox grumbles as he digs around in his wallet. “Shit. I’m short.” He looks up, twisting his head around for his twin, but Kit’s still outside, filling up. “Uh, hang on a sec.”

The Fill-R-Up girl—her nametag says *Rae*—doesn’t answer, isn’t even listening, because Pan’s leaning over the counter. Looking at her.

And suddenly neither Rae nor the girl restocking cigarettes behind her seem to be able to remember what they’re doing.

I continue minding my own business, but glance up at the girls: their cut-crease eyes, their heatless curls, their nail polish. All just to work at the freaking Fill-R-Up.

Meanwhile, I rolled out of bed and pulled on the same pants I wore yesterday...and the day before. My hair’s messed up from my helmet and my lashes haven’t seen mascara in...well, a long time.

And *I’m* the one who’ll be spending the day with four biker boys in leather and road dust.

It really feels like I’m getting away with something. Which I guess I am.

“So you like working here?” Pan is asking the girls. He grins at them, ruffling his hair with his fingers. Right now it’s fire-engine red, stop-sign red, Crayola-crayon red.

On anyone else but him, it’d look ridiculous.

Rae and Lauren blush.

“It’s okay.” Rae speaks up first, twirling a long ponytail strand around her finger.

“Just okay?” Pan looks surprised.

“You meet a lot of people,” Lauren offers.

“I bet,” Pan says. “Anyone interesting?”

Rae and Lauren look at each other. Giggle.

Because...yeah, I’m sure that the five of us are a welcome change from the truckers and night-shift nurses. Five biker boys sauntering in on a slow, dusty afternoon, all gleaming helmets and black leather. For a girl working for minimum wage in the outskirts of London Valley, that’s the stuff dreams are made of.

If I were in their shoes, I’d do the same thing.

“Sometimes,” Rae says at last. Flirtily.

“Okay.” Fox returns, interrupting, oblivious, a fifty in his hand. “We’re good.” He flashes them his big broad grin, which they clearly don’t mind too much either. Fox has a smile that could sell toothpaste and a body that could sell...I don’t know, protein powder, or something. Whatever makes you big and strong like that.

But even for all that, he’s not the big get here, and he knows it. Doesn’t mind it.

Everybody loves Pan.

Everybody.

My heartbeat quickens a little.

"Oh." Rae jolts back to life, blinking. "You want a bag?"

As she busies herself stuffing can after can into the plastic, a single black-gloved hand slams a a pack of jerky on the counter.

"This too." Blue. Mr. Tall, Dark, and Threatening. Helmet still on, visor down. It's at least partially an act, the grumpy asshole thing.

But only partially.

Lauren's eyes drift from the helmet to the jacket to the glimpse of tattoos crawling out from under every edge of his T-shirt.

"Do I know you from somewhere?"

Blue just shrugs.

"I bet you do." Pan grabs the edge of Blue's shirt and yanks it up, flashing his abs for all to see. "Ring a bell?"

"Omigod." Lauren goes white. Rae bugs her eyes out, questioning, and Lauren gives her a definite *I'll tell you later* look in response.

Pan doubles over, cracking up. Blue flips Pan off, but nods to the girls. "Keep the change." He strides off.

"Hey!" Kit appears at my side, frowning. "That was *my* fifty he gave them," he grumbles. But he takes the bag from Rae, and offers me my drink without my asking.

Kit's easy that way. I like that.

“Ask him for a kickback,” I tell him, cracking my tallboy and slugging it. “You know, if they subscribe to him after this.”

Fox laughs. “Yeah, like a finder’s fee.”

“More like a pimp.” Kit makes a face. “No thanks.”

They start bickering back and forth, but I tune it out, because Pan’s leaning over the counter again, his gold feather earring dangling, head cocked as he asks the girls some other question.

But then he pauses. Feels my eyes on him.

Looks at me.

I hold his gaze. Not too long. Just long enough to send a message.

To do what I’m here to do.

Keep him on track.

I see my opening and take it. I tap an imaginary watch on my wrist. Raise an eyebrow for good measure.

Pan sighs. “Fine, fine.” He rolls his eyes. “Apparently I’ve got to go.”

The girls exchange a look. “Go where?”

“Little League practice,” I deadpan, clapping a hand on each of Pan’s shoulders and pulling him up. He’s kept Krye waiting long enough, and if there’s one person you don’t want on your bad side, it’s the local Albanian mafia kingpin. “He’s our star pitcher.”

Besides, Pan’s in one of his broke phases, and he knows it. If the threat of mob violence won’t motivate him, a lack of cash will.

Pan nods. "My man Tink is right. Duty calls." He half-lifts his helmet in a salute. "Been a pleasure, though."

The girls look at each other. A look I know. Each one daring the other to go first.

Lauren seems to win.

"Can..." She sucks in a breath, says her next sentence like it's all one word. "*CanIgetaridesometime?*"

Her eyes are on Pan, but drift up to me, briefly.

I don't give rides. Obviously. But I like knowing I'm under consideration.

Means Tink's doing a good job.

But these girls...

Pan sucks his teeth, fake-deliberating. "Weeeeell..."

"How old are you?" I interrupt. Gruffer than I need to be.

Lauren scowls briefly. Then flushes. "Twenty."

"Bullshit." Rae rolls her eyes. "She's *seventeen*. Same as me." She smiles. "But my birthday's in four months."

Pan catches my eyes, gives me the tiniest wince.

Told you, I telegraph to him.

He's not that much older—we're not, any of us. Least of all me. And he may refuse to act his age, but there are still some lines he won't cross.

It's why I trust him.

Lauren's scowl at Rae deepens. I slug back more of my caffeine. And an idea hits me.

"Hey," I say to Pan, nodding towards the outside. "Is that a kid messing with your bike out there?"

He slumps. "Aw, what the fuck—"

There is no kid, but Pan's territorial enough about his baby to go check anyway, and it'll buy me a minute or two. He jogs out, and I turn back to the counter. Lean on it a little. Don't make eye contact per se but make sure they know I'm giving them my full attention.

They're short, these girls. Petite, as Gram would say. I'm not. That might be the easiest part about being a guy, the part that comes most naturally for me: being nearly six feet, and that's before you add boots.

That, and making dick jokes.

Behind the counter, the greasy rollers are click-click-clicking under their heat lamps, slow-spinning corn dogs.

"Can I get one of those?" I nod.

"Huh?" Lauren blinks. "Oh. Sure." She goes for the tongs. Rae, meanwhile, is craning her neck after Pan. I make a show of following suit, then looking right at her.

"Here's the thing," I make my voice warm and low, older-brother style. "My boy Pan, out there?"

"What?" Rae looks startled. "Oh, um—"

"You want a mini?" Lauren interrupts, from the corn dog machine. "Or a regular?"

"Both," I answer. The bro-country song fades into something 80s-ish, with saxophones. I look back at Rae. "Anyways, he's, uh..." I smirk. "How do I put this?"

Lauren returns with my corn dogs, and I lift them out of their paper boat. To demonstrate.

"You know." I let the full-size dog drop a little so only the teeny one remains upright. "Mini."

Rae's eyes widen. "Nuh-uh," she says, doing a slow shake of her head. But she's smiling.

"Yeah huh," I say. "Like, so much so that it's weird, you know?"

"Oh my *God*," Rae looks at Lauren and they dissolve

I've turned it into a literal dick-measuring contest.

"Don't tell him I told you," I hurry on. "All I'm saying is, maybe go find some nice boys your own age to take you out for a milkshake."

"False alarm," Pan says, striding back in. "Just a..." Seeing the three of us, he stops in his tracks. Frowns. "What are *you* all talking about?"

"Nothing," I say.

Rae and Lauren burst into another round of giggles.

"What?" Pan's smiling, head cocked.

"Nothing," I repeat. Ever so innocent, leaning against the counter. "Just told them about your little... condition."

"My...?"

"Emphasis on *little*," Lauren squeaks, then collapses into laughter again.

Realization dawns. Pan scowls. But he's smiling too. "You bastard. You—"

"Don't worry about it." I'm smiling now, too, because he's smiling, and hold out my hand with an offer to share. "Corn dog?"

Pan responds by grabbing me by the shoulder and steers me towards the exit. "Ladies, excuse us."

"We work 'til close Friday and Saturday," Lauren calls. "Maybe stop by again?"

"Maybe." Pan yells back, with a wink. "Never say never."

Their giddy little shrieks echo with the chime of the entrance as he shoves me the rest of the way out the door.

I stumble, but I'm laughing.

Because mission accomplished. Everyone goes home happy.

Outside, the others are waiting, Fox and Kit leaning idly while Blue's already on his bike, ready to go. The air feels hotter and dryer now, the late afternoon sun baking all of London Valley, and we've got at least another half-hour ride to Krye's.

"Finally." Fox sighs and rolls his mask down his head. "You guys are like girls in the freakin' bathroom."

"Sexist." Kit revs at him.

"You're sexist." Fox revs back, helmet on.

"You got her number?" Blue. Sounding skeptical.

"Yeah," I cut in for Pan. "Seventeen."

Blue barks out a laugh. Fox chuckles, too, and Kit just shakes his head.

Pan swings a leg over his bike, revs it to life, and skids past me *just* close enough to spit a little gravel on my leg.

"Fuck you very much, *Tink*." But he's laughing.

"Thanks for keeping you out of prison, more like." Blue. "Don't be a dipshit."

"Can't help it."

"What happened to don't ask, don't tell?" Fox wonders.

"That's not what that means." Kit sighs.

"Officially bored now. Bye!" Another rev and Pan's rocketing off into the road, barely missing an SUV that leans loudly on the horn.

"Motherfucker," I whisper under my breath. "You got a death wish?" I add, into the mic. I'm ready: helmet snug, jacket zipped, clutch in.

"Pssh." Pan's voice rings in my ear through the mic as I accelerate after him, Blue, Fox, and Kit trailing. "I'm too young to die."

Someone snorts. Kit. "Yeah, okay. What's that saying? Die young, leave a good-looking corpse?"

"Damn." Fox. Tearing up the road to my left, leaning back a little in his seat. "They say that?"

"Only if you're good-looking in the first place." Blue again. "Rules him out."

"Hey!" Pan cries. "I'm pretty. Tink, back me up."

I speed up, skating lane to lane, eating up pavement. Heart racing along with the engine.

"Beautiful," I deadpan. "Stunning."

Pan laughs. "*Thank you.*"

I catch up to Pan. Hang right at his side. Wind whipping over me, blasting the leather surface of my chest, roaring in my ears.

It's all for show, the shit-giving. Even from me.

No sooner do I catch up than Pan zips ahead. Teasing me, baiting me to follow.

I do. Like I always do. The bike hums underneath me, and I try to tune into that instead. It's a good bike, nothing fancy—Kawasaki Ninja, bright green, couple of scratches but and fits me just fine at all of my 5' 11" in boots. Three or four previous owners, according to Fox when he handed it over to me, but *she purrs like a kitten*.

And I do like that. The sound, the speed. How it spins the world away from you.

You ever want to fly, Bella?

I shake the memory away and decel slightly as we knife off the exit to the Hills, the sun glaring directly into my visor.

Those days are long gone.

I ride with the Lost Boys now.

Read Lost Girl

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A pixie. The name doesn't even make sense. Pixies, fairies, whatever—they never actually have short hair. I think of all the princess stuff in my bedroom back at Gram's, the Barbies and dollar-store picture books. Long hair, always.

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everything look green and the curtains they have between beds don't give anyone any privacy.

Not that I've had any privacy for a while.

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"Five-eleven." She blinks at my chart and does a low whistle. "God, I'd *love* to be that tall."

She pauses. Like I'm supposed to congratulate her on being jealous of me. For something I have no control over.

"And you're so *skinny*, too!"

I feel like nurses aren't supposed to say that. But this is a shitty hospital and she's probably a shitty nurse.

"You could model, you know."

That.

Icepick. Stomach.

I can't say anything, I can't react, I can't cry because I can't even get enough air.

So I just ball up the blanket harder in my fist. Keep staring at the ceiling. At the ugly green light. Like it's the morning star.

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She doesn't need to warn me. I saw the waiting room. I can hear all the stretchers banging in down the hall.

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“Okay. If you feel sharp pain or feel like you’re losing consciousness—”

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“Someone called for victim’s advocate?” The charge nurse, the one that barks everything she says. “LVPD actually sent someone for once.”

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No answer. Then the charge nurse again.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you, honey. It's Friday fucking night in the Valley and this is the emergency department. Everyone here's a victim of something. You got a name, or anything?"

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"Bella?"

Nurse Chelsea. I think fast. "Ladies' room?"

She relaxes a little. I'm not here to bother her. "Around the corner."

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And suddenly neither Rae nor the girl restocking cigarettes behind her seem to be able to remember what they’re doing.

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But then he pauses. Feels my eyes on him.

Looks at me.

I hold his gaze. Not too long. Just long enough to send a message.

To do what I'm here to do.

Keep him on track.

I see my opening and take it. I tap an imaginary watch on my wrist. Raise an eyebrow for good measure.

Pan sighs. "Fine, fine." He rolls his eyes. "Apparently I've got to go."

The girls exchange a look. "Go where?"

"Little League practice," I deadpan, clapping a hand on each of Pan's shoulders and pulling him up. He's kept Krye waiting long enough, and if there's one person you don't want on your bad side, it's the local Albanian mafia kingpin. "He's our star pitcher."

Besides, Pan's in one of his broke phases, and he knows it. If the threat of mob violence won't motivate him, a lack of cash will.

Pan nods. "My man Tink is right. Duty calls." He half-lifts his helmet in a salute. "Been a pleasure, though."

The girls look at each other. A look I know. Each one daring the other to go first.

Lauren seems to win.

"Can..." She sucks in a breath, says her next sentence like it's all one word. "*CanIgetaridesometime?*"

Her eyes are on Pan, but drift up to me, briefly.

I don't give rides. Obviously. But I like knowing I'm under consideration.

Means Tink's doing a good job.

But these girls...

Pan sucks his teeth, fake-deliberating. "Weeeeell..."

"How old are you?" I interrupt. Gruffer than I need to be.

Lauren scowls briefly. Then flushes. "Twenty."

"Bullshit." Rae rolls her eyes. "She's *seventeen*. Same as me." She smiles. "But my birthday's in four months."

Pan catches my eyes, gives me the tiniest wince.

Told you, I telegraph to him.

He's not that much older—we're not, any of us. Least of all me. And he may refuse to act his age, but there are still some lines he won't cross.

It's why I trust him.

Lauren's scowl at Rae deepens. I slug back more of my caffeine. And an idea hits me.

"Hey," I say to Pan, nodding towards the outside. "Is that a kid messing with your bike out there?"

He slumps. "Aw, what the fuck—"

There is no kid, but Pan's territorial enough about his baby to go check anyway, and it'll buy me a minute or two. He jogs out, and I turn back to the counter. Lean on it a little. Don't make eye contact per se but make sure they know I'm giving them my full attention.

They're short, these girls. Petite, as Gram would say. I'm not. That might be the easiest part about being a guy, the part that comes most naturally for me: being nearly six feet, and that's before you add boots.

That, and making dick jokes.

Behind the counter, the greasy rollers are click-click-clicking under their heat lamps, slow-spinning corn dogs.

"Can I get one of those?" I nod.

"Huh?" Lauren blinks. "Oh. Sure." She goes for the tongs. Rae, meanwhile, is craning her neck after Pan. I make a show of following suit, then looking right at her.

"Here's the thing," I make my voice warm and low, older-brother style. "My boy Pan, out there?"

"What?" Rae looks startled. "Oh, um—"

"You want a mini?" Lauren interrupts, from the corn dog machine. "Or a regular?"

"Both," I answer. The bro-country song fades into something 80s-ish, with saxophones. I look back at Rae. "Anyways, he's, uh..." I smirk. "How do I put this?"

Lauren returns with my corn dogs, and I lift them out of their paper boat. To demonstrate.

"You know." I let the full-size dog drop a little so only the teeny one remains upright. "Mini."

Rae's eyes widen. "Nuh-uh," she says, doing a slow shake of her head. But she's smiling.

"Yeah huh," I say. "Like, so much so that it's weird, you know?"

"Oh my *God*," Rae looks at Lauren and they dissolve

I've turned it into a literal dick-measuring contest.

"Don't tell him I told you," I hurry on. "All I'm saying is, maybe go find some nice boys your own age to take you out for a milkshake."

"False alarm," Pan says, striding back in. "Just a..." Seeing the three of us, he stops in his tracks. Frowns. "What are *you* all talking about?"

"Nothing," I say.

Rae and Lauren burst into another round of giggles.

"What?" Pan's smiling, head cocked.

"Nothing," I repeat. Ever so innocent, leaning against the counter. "Just told them about your little... condition."

"My...?"

"Emphasis on *little*," Lauren squeaks, then collapses into laughter again.

Realization dawns. Pan scowls. But he's smiling too. "You bastard. You—"

"Don't worry about it." I'm smiling now, too, because he's smiling, and hold out my hand with an offer to share. "Corn dog?"

Pan responds by grabbing me by the shoulder and steers me towards the exit. "Ladies, excuse us."

"We work 'til close Friday and Saturday," Lauren calls. "Maybe stop by again?"

"Maybe." Pan yells back, with a wink. "Never say never."

Their giddy little shrieks echo with the chime of the entrance as he shoves me the rest of the way out the door.

I stumble, but I'm laughing.

Because mission accomplished. Everyone goes home happy.

Outside, the others are waiting, Fox and Kit leaning idly while Blue's already on his bike, ready to go. The air feels hotter and dryer now, the late afternoon sun baking all of London Valley, and we've got at least another half-hour ride to Krye's.

"Finally." Fox sighs and rolls his mask down his head. "You guys are like girls in the freakin' bathroom."

"Sexist." Kit revs at him.

"You're sexist." Fox revs back, helmet on.

"You got her number?" Blue. Sounding skeptical.

"Yeah," I cut in for Pan. "Seventeen."

Blue barks out a laugh. Fox chuckles, too, and Kit just shakes his head.

Pan swings a leg over his bike, revs it to life, and skids past me *just* close enough to spit a little gravel on my leg.

"Fuck you very much, *Tink*." But he's laughing.

"Thanks for keeping you out of prison, more like." Blue. "Don't be a dipshit."

"Can't help it."

"What happened to don't ask, don't tell?" Fox wonders.

"That's not what that means." Kit sighs.

"Officially bored now. Bye!" Another rev and Pan's rocketing off into the road, barely missing an SUV that leans loudly on the horn.

"Motherfucker," I whisper under my breath. "You got a death wish?" I add, into the mic. I'm ready: helmet snug, jacket zipped, clutch in.

"Pssh." Pan's voice rings in my ear through the mic as I accelerate after him, Blue, Fox, and Kit trailing. "I'm too young to die."

Someone snorts. Kit. "Yeah, okay. What's that saying? Die young, leave a good-looking corpse?"

"Damn." Fox. Tearing up the road to my left, leaning back a little in his seat. "They say that?"

"Only if you're good-looking in the first place." Blue again. "Rules him out."

"Hey!" Pan cries. "I'm pretty. Tink, back me up."

I speed up, skating lane to lane, eating up pavement. Heart racing along with the engine.

"Beautiful," I deadpan. "Stunning."

Pan laughs. "*Thank you.*"

I catch up to Pan. Hang right at his side. Wind whipping over me, blasting the leather surface of my chest, roaring in my ears.

It's all for show, the shit-giving. Even from me.

No sooner do I catch up than Pan zips ahead. Teasing me, baiting me to follow.

I do. Like I always do. The bike hums underneath me, and I try to tune into that instead. It's a good bike, nothing fancy—Kawasaki Ninja, bright green, couple of scratches but and fits me just fine at all of my 5' 11" in boots. Three or four previous owners, according to Fox when he handed it over to me, but *she purrs like a kitten*.

And I do like that. The sound, the speed. How it spins the world away from you.

You ever want to fly, Bella?

I shake the memory away and decel slightly as we knife off the exit to the Hills, the sun glaring directly into my visor.

Those days are long gone.

I ride with the Lost Boys now.

Bella

A pixie cut.

That's what the nurse just called it. The nurse, with her long, long ponytail.

Slowly, tentatively, I run a hand over my head. Over what feels like my *scalp*.

I'd cry if it didn't hurt so much just to breathe.

"I always wished I could pull off short hair," she blathers on. "But you've got the bone structure for a pixie."

A pixie. The name doesn't even make sense. Pixies, fairies, whatever—they never actually have short hair. I think of all the princess stuff in my bedroom back at Gram's, the Barbies and dollar-store picture books. Long hair, always.

And this isn't a pixie cut, anyway. A pixie cut gets done in a beauty parlor. Not the back of an ambulance.

I find my voice. "Can I go yet?"

The emergency department at London Valley Memorial smells like barf and bleach. The lights make

everything look green and the curtains they have between beds don't give anyone any privacy.

Not that I've had any privacy for a while.

The nurse pretends not to hear me. Or maybe she actually doesn't. It's definitely loud enough in here.

"Five-eleven." She blinks at my chart and does a low whistle. "God, I'd *love* to be that tall."

She pauses. Like I'm supposed to congratulate her on being jealous of me. For something I have no control over.

"And you're so *skinny*, too!"

I feel like nurses aren't supposed to say that. But this is a shitty hospital and she's probably a shitty nurse.

"You could model, you know."

That.

Icepick. Stomach.

I can't say anything, I can't react, I can't cry because I can't even get enough air.

So I just ball up the blanket harder in my fist. Keep staring at the ceiling. At the ugly green light. Like it's the morning star.

"Okay, then." The nurse mutters it in a way that I'm not sure I'm supposed to hear. "Well, I am sorry about the wait." She doesn't sound sorry. "The physician will be with you as soon as possible, but I should warn you, we are *very* busy tonight."

She doesn't need to warn me. I saw the waiting room. I can hear all the stretchers banging in down the hall.

“Any new or increased pain since we checked you in?”

I shake my head.

“Okay. If you feel sharp pain or feel like you’re losing consciousness—”

“Can I at least take this off?” I don’t even know what it’s called. I just know I can barely breathe.

She smiles. Like I’m stupid for not knowing what the beige plastic-and-velcro thing smashing down my chest is called. “The support binder,” she says. “The physician will go over all of that when he arrives.”

When he arrives.

He.

“Okay, but...” My voice sounds craggy. I swallow. “Can you, like, ballpark it?”

“Unfortunately, I’m not able to speculate about treatment, diagnosis, or recovery times.” She sounds all smug about it. I bet she was a mean girl in high school. “You did sustain some severe injuries to the ribs and sternum and for the time being it’s very important that the fractures remain stabilized.”

She’s got on pink scrubs. A pink headband. That long, long ponytail.

“If you want, you can ask the physician when he —”

Never fucking mind. I close my eyes and sink into the pillow. I’m trying to tune things out, when—

“Someone called for victim’s advocate?” The charge nurse, the one that barks everything she says. “LVPD actually sent someone for once.”

I open my eyes again.

No answer. Then the charge nurse again.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you, honey. It's Friday fucking night in the Valley and this is the emergency department. Everyone here's a victim of something. You got a name, or anything?"

You bitch. You murdering bitch.

You fucking killed him.

I am gonna drag your skinny ass in on murder charges. Make no mistake, I am going to get the fucking cops in here and—

Headrush when I stand up. I grab my sweatshirt from the chair. There's enough people walking back and forth that I make it to the end of the hall.

"Bella?"

Nurse Chelsea. I think fast. "Ladies' room?"

She relaxes a little. I'm not here to bother her. "Around the corner."

She points. I walk.

I'm not going to the ladies' room. I don't turn the corner at all, but she doesn't notice or doesn't care. Instead I keep going straight, straight on to the waiting room, to the sliding glass doors, to the outside.

The parking lot's dark. London Valley never gets cold, not really, but when the sun goes down there's a chill in the air, like the blue of the sky is freezing downward to earth.

I look up. Look up and take as deep a breath as I can under this stupid binder.

There's stars out.

Bella

Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight...

The nursery rhyme goes off in my head, automatic.

Stupid.

Grow up, Bella, I tell myself. Grow the fuck up.

And then I run.

Tink

Ten months later

“Suck my diiiiiiiick!”

The voice trails back to me from the bike ahead as it whips between cars down the 303. I grimace, rev, and follow.

Pan’s such an asshole.

“Oh, *very* mature,” someone mutters into the mic. Kit, I think, but maybe Fox—I suck at telling them apart by voice. Doesn’t matter. I say nothing, just focus on gunning it down the asphalt and not getting blinded by the late-afternoon sun.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” crackles a reply. Pan. Wherever he went ahead of us, fastest as ever.

“Yeah, and you’re one to fucking talk, Fox.” *That’s* Kit. I skim past a pickup and take over the lane. The dusty green expanse of the valley stretches hot and dry to my right as I lean into the curve.

“Aw, I’m plenty mature.” Fox. “Someone back me up.”

“No.” That’s Blue.

“I see that and raise you a *hell* no.” Pan.

Fox sighs. “Tink?”

The glare’s torching me in the eyes and I’m sweating under my road jacket besides. I don’t really care, though.

I’m happy.

I rev the throttle. “I’m with Pan.”

Another sigh. “Fuck all of you,” Fox mutters.

“Hard pass.” Pan guns it. “Last one there’s buying!”

Fox is the last one there.

“Sixty-six eighty-three.” The Fill-R-Up girl tosses her ponytail as she rings up the tallboys. The A/C is weak, the air smells like taquitos and sounds like bro-country, and I’ve got my hands in my pockets, studying a rack of air fresheners.

“Aw, for real?” Fox grumbles as he digs around in his wallet. “Shit. I’m short.” He looks up, twisting his head around for his twin, but Kit’s still outside, filling up. “Uh, hang on a sec.”

The Fill-R-Up girl—her nametag says *Rae*—doesn’t answer, isn’t even listening, because Pan’s leaning over the counter. Looking at her.

And suddenly neither Rae nor the girl restocking cigarettes behind her seem to be able to remember what they’re doing.

I continue minding my own business, but glance up at the girls: their cut-crease eyes, their heatless curls, their nail polish. All just to work at the freaking Fill-R-Up.

Meanwhile, I rolled out of bed and pulled on the same pants I wore yesterday...and the day before. My hair’s messed up from my helmet and my lashes haven’t seen mascara in...well, a long time.

And *I’m* the one who’ll be spending the day with four biker boys in leather and road dust.

It really feels like I’m getting away with something. Which I guess I am.

“So you like working here?” Pan is asking the girls. He grins at them, ruffling his hair with his fingers. Right now it’s fire-engine red, stop-sign red, Crayola-crayon red.

On anyone else but him, it’d look ridiculous.

Rae and Lauren blush.

“It’s okay.” Rae speaks up first, twirling a long ponytail strand around her finger.

“Just okay?” Pan looks surprised.

“You meet a lot of people,” Lauren offers.

“I bet,” Pan says. “Anyone interesting?”

Rae and Lauren look at each other. Giggle.

Because...yeah, I’m sure that the five of us are a welcome change from the truckers and night-shift nurses. Five biker boys sauntering in on a slow, dusty afternoon, all gleaming helmets and black leather. For a girl working for minimum wage in the outskirts of London Valley, that’s the stuff dreams are made of.

If I were in their shoes, I’d do the same thing.

“Sometimes,” Rae says at last. Flirtily.

“Okay.” Fox returns, interrupting, oblivious, a fifty in his hand. “We’re good.” He flashes them his big broad grin, which they clearly don’t mind too much either. Fox has a smile that could sell toothpaste and a body that could sell...I don’t know, protein powder, or something. Whatever makes you big and strong like that.

But even for all that, he’s not the big get here, and he knows it. Doesn’t mind it.

Everybody loves Pan.

Everybody.

My heartbeat quickens a little.

"Oh." Rae jolts back to life, blinking. "You want a bag?"

As she busies herself stuffing can after can into the plastic, a single black-gloved hand slams a a pack of jerky on the counter.

"This too." Blue. Mr. Tall, Dark, and Threatening. Helmet still on, visor down. It's at least partially an act, the grumpy asshole thing.

But only partially.

Lauren's eyes drift from the helmet to the jacket to the glimpse of tattoos crawling out from under every edge of his T-shirt.

"Do I know you from somewhere?"

Blue just shrugs.

"I bet you do." Pan grabs the edge of Blue's shirt and yanks it up, flashing his abs for all to see. "Ring a bell?"

"Omigod." Lauren goes white. Rae bugs her eyes out, questioning, and Lauren gives her a definite *I'll tell you later* look in response.

Pan doubles over, cracking up. Blue flips Pan off, but nods to the girls. "Keep the change." He strides off.

"Hey!" Kit appears at my side, frowning. "That was *my* fifty he gave them," he grumbles. But he takes the bag from Rae, and offers me my drink without my asking.

Kit's easy that way. I like that.

"Ask him for a kickback," I tell him, cracking my tallboy and slugging it. "You know, if they subscribe to him after this."

Fox laughs. "Yeah, like a finder's fee."

"More like a pimp." Kit makes a face. "No thanks."

They start bickering back and forth, but I tune it out, because Pan's leaning over the counter again, his gold feather earring dangling, head cocked as he asks the girls some other question.

But then he pauses. Feels my eyes on him.

Looks at me.

I hold his gaze. Not too long. Just long enough to send a message.

To do what I'm here to do.

Keep him on track.

I see my opening and take it. I tap an imaginary watch on my wrist. Raise an eyebrow for good measure.

Pan sighs. "Fine, fine." He rolls his eyes. "Apparently I've got to go."

The girls exchange a look. "Go where?"

"Little League practice," I deadpan, clapping a hand on each of Pan's shoulders and pulling him up. He's kept Krye waiting long enough, and if there's one person you don't want on your bad side, it's the local Albanian mafia kingpin. "He's our star pitcher."

Besides, Pan's in one of his broke phases, and he knows it. If the threat of mob violence won't motivate him, a lack of cash will.

Pan nods. "My man Tink is right. Duty calls." He half-lifts his helmet in a salute. "Been a pleasure, though."

The girls look at each other. A look I know. Each one daring the other to go first.

Lauren seems to win.

"Can..." She sucks in a breath, says her next sentence like it's all one word. "*CanIgetaridesometime?*"

Her eyes are on Pan, but drift up to me, briefly.

I don't give rides. Obviously. But I like knowing I'm under consideration.

Means Tink's doing a good job.

But these girls...

Pan sucks his teeth, fake-deliberating. "Weeeeell..."

"How old are you?" I interrupt. Gruffer than I need to be.

Lauren scowls briefly. Then flushes. "Twenty."

"Bullshit." Rae rolls her eyes. "She's *seventeen*. Same as me." She smiles. "But my birthday's in four months."

Pan catches my eyes, gives me the tiniest wince.

Told you, I telegraph to him.

He's not that much older—we're not, any of us. Least of all me. And he may refuse to act his age, but there are still some lines he won't cross.

It's why I trust him.

Lauren's scowl at Rae deepens. I slug back more of my caffeine. And an idea hits me.

"Hey," I say to Pan, nodding towards the outside. "Is that a kid messing with your bike out there?"

He slumps. "Aw, what the fuck—"

There is no kid, but Pan's territorial enough about his baby to go check anyway, and it'll buy me a minute or two. He jogs out, and I turn back to the counter. Lean on it a little. Don't make eye contact per se but make sure they know I'm giving them my full attention.

They're short, these girls. Petite, as Gram would say. I'm not. That might be the easiest part about being a guy, the part that comes most naturally for me: being nearly six feet, and that's before you add boots.

That, and making dick jokes.

Behind the counter, the greasy rollers are click-click-clicking under their heat lamps, slow-spinning corn dogs.

"Can I get one of those?" I nod.

"Huh?" Lauren blinks. "Oh. Sure." She goes for the tongs. Rae, meanwhile, is craning her neck after Pan. I make a show of following suit, then looking right at her.

"Here's the thing," I make my voice warm and low, older-brother style. "My boy Pan, out there?"

"What?" Rae looks startled. "Oh, um—"

"You want a mini?" Lauren interrupts, from the corn dog machine. "Or a regular?"

"Both," I answer. The bro-country song fades into something 80s-ish, with saxophones. I look back at Rae. "Anyways, he's, uh..." I smirk. "How do I put this?"

Lauren returns with my corn dogs, and I lift them out of their paper boat. To demonstrate.

"You know." I let the full-size dog drop a little so only the teeny one remains upright. "Mini."

Rae's eyes widen. "Nuh-uh," she says, doing a slow shake of her head. But she's smiling.

"Yeah huh," I say. "Like, so much so that it's weird, you know?"

"Oh my *God*," Rae looks at Lauren and they dissolve

I've turned it into a literal dick-measuring contest.

"Don't tell him I told you," I hurry on. "All I'm saying is, maybe go find some nice boys your own age to take you out for a milkshake."

"False alarm," Pan says, striding back in. "Just a..." Seeing the three of us, he stops in his tracks. Frowns. "What are *you* all talking about?"

"Nothing," I say.

Rae and Lauren burst into another round of giggles.

"What?" Pan's smiling, head cocked.

"Nothing," I repeat. Ever so innocent, leaning against the counter. "Just told them about your little... condition."

"My...?"

"Emphasis on *little*," Lauren squeaks, then collapses into laughter again.

Realization dawns. Pan scowls. But he's smiling too. "You bastard. You—"

"Don't worry about it." I'm smiling now, too, because he's smiling, and hold out my hand with an offer to share. "Corn dog?"

Pan responds by grabbing me by the shoulder and steers me towards the exit. "Ladies, excuse us."

"We work 'til close Friday and Saturday," Lauren calls. "Maybe stop by again?"

"Maybe." Pan yells back, with a wink. "Never say never."

Their giddy little shrieks echo with the chime of the entrance as he shoves me the rest of the way out the door.

I stumble, but I'm laughing.

Because mission accomplished. Everyone goes home happy.

Outside, the others are waiting, Fox and Kit leaning idly while Blue's already on his bike, ready to go. The air feels hotter and dryer now, the late afternoon sun baking all of London Valley, and we've got at least another half-hour ride to Krye's.

"Finally." Fox sighs and rolls his mask down his head. "You guys are like girls in the freakin' bathroom."

"Sexist." Kit revs at him.

"You're sexist." Fox revs back, helmet on.

"You got her number?" Blue. Sounding skeptical.

"Yeah," I cut in for Pan. "Seventeen."

Blue barks out a laugh. Fox chuckles, too, and Kit just shakes his head.

Pan swings a leg over his bike, revs it to life, and skids past me *just* close enough to spit a little gravel on my leg.

"Fuck you very much, *Tink*." But he's laughing.

"Thanks for keeping you out of prison, more like." Blue. "Don't be a dipshit."

"Can't help it."

“What happened to don’t ask, don’t tell?” Fox wonders.

“That’s not what that means.” Kit sighs.

“Officially bored now. Bye!” Another rev and Pan’s rocketing off into the road, barely missing an SUV that leans loudly on the horn.

“Motherfucker,” I whisper under my breath. “You got a death wish?” I add, into the mic. I’m ready: helmet snug, jacket zipped, clutch in.

“Pssh.” Pan’s voice rings in my ear through the mic as I accelerate after him, Blue, Fox, and Kit trailing. “I’m too young to die.”

Someone snorts. Kit. “Yeah, okay. What’s that saying? Die young, leave a good-looking corpse?”

“Damn.” Fox. Tearing up the road to my left, leaning back a little in his seat. “They say that?”

“Only if you’re good-looking in the first place.” Blue again. “Rules him out.”

“Hey!” Pan cries. “I’m pretty. Tink, back me up.”

I speed up, skating lane to lane, eating up pavement. Heart racing along with the engine.

“Beautiful,” I deadpan. “Stunning.”

Pan laughs. “*Thank you.*”

I catch up to Pan. Hang right at his side. Wind whipping over me, blasting the leather surface of my chest, roaring in my ears.

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Bella

A pixie cut.

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Slowly, tentatively, I run a hand over my head. Over what feels like my *scalp*.

I'd cry if it didn't hurt so much just to breathe.

"I always wished I could pull off short hair," she blathers on. "But you've got the bone structure for a pixie."

A pixie. The name doesn't even make sense. Pixies, fairies, whatever—they never actually have short hair. I think of all the princess stuff in my bedroom back at Gram's, the Barbies and dollar-store picture books. Long hair, always.

And this isn't a pixie cut, anyway. A pixie cut gets done in a beauty parlor. Not the back of an ambulance.

I find my voice. "Can I go yet?"

The emergency department at London Valley Memorial smells like barf and bleach. The lights make

everything look green and the curtains they have between beds don't give anyone any privacy.

Not that I've had any privacy for a while.

The nurse pretends not to hear me. Or maybe she actually doesn't. It's definitely loud enough in here.

"Five-eleven." She blinks at my chart and does a low whistle. "God, I'd *love* to be that tall."

She pauses. Like I'm supposed to congratulate her on being jealous of me. For something I have no control over.

"And you're so *skinny*, too!"

I feel like nurses aren't supposed to say that. But this is a shitty hospital and she's probably a shitty nurse.

"You could model, you know."

That.

Icepick. Stomach.

I can't say anything, I can't react, I can't cry because I can't even get enough air.

So I just ball up the blanket harder in my fist. Keep staring at the ceiling. At the ugly green light. Like it's the morning star.

"Okay, then." The nurse mutters it in a way that I'm not sure I'm supposed to hear. "Well, I am sorry about the wait." She doesn't sound sorry. "The physician will be with you as soon as possible, but I should warn you, we are *very* busy tonight."

She doesn't need to warn me. I saw the waiting room. I can hear all the stretchers banging in down the hall.

“Any new or increased pain since we checked you in?”

I shake my head.

“Okay. If you feel sharp pain or feel like you’re losing consciousness—”

“Can I at least take this off?” I don’t even know what it’s called. I just know I can barely breathe.

She smiles. Like I’m stupid for not knowing what the beige plastic-and-velcro thing smashing down my chest is called. “The support binder,” she says. “The physician will go over all of that when he arrives.”

When he arrives.

He.

“Okay, but...” My voice sounds craggy. I swallow. “Can you, like, ballpark it?”

“Unfortunately, I’m not able to speculate about treatment, diagnosis, or recovery times.” She sounds all smug about it. I bet she was a mean girl in high school. “You did sustain some severe injuries to the ribs and sternum and for the time being it’s very important that the fractures remain stabilized.”

She’s got on pink scrubs. A pink headband. That long, long ponytail.

“If you want, you can ask the physician when he —”

Never fucking mind. I close my eyes and sink into the pillow. I’m trying to tune things out, when—

“Someone called for victim’s advocate?” The charge nurse, the one that barks everything she says. “LVPD actually sent someone for once.”

I open my eyes again.

No answer. Then the charge nurse again.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you, honey. It's Friday fucking night in the Valley and this is the emergency department. Everyone here's a victim of something. You got a name, or anything?"

You bitch. You murdering bitch.

You fucking killed him.

I am gonna drag your skinny ass in on murder charges. Make no mistake, I am going to get the fucking cops in here and—

Headrush when I stand up. I grab my sweatshirt from the chair. There's enough people walking back and forth that I make it to the end of the hall.

"Bella?"

Nurse Chelsea. I think fast. "Ladies' room?"

She relaxes a little. I'm not here to bother her. "Around the corner."

She points. I walk.

I'm not going to the ladies' room. I don't turn the corner at all, but she doesn't notice or doesn't care. Instead I keep going straight, straight on to the waiting room, to the sliding glass doors, to the outside.

The parking lot's dark. London Valley never gets cold, not really, but when the sun goes down there's a chill in the air, like the blue of the sky is freezing downward to earth.

I look up. Look up and take as deep a breath as I can under this stupid binder.

There's stars out.

Bella

Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight...
The nursery rhyme goes off in my head, automatic.
Stupid.
Grow up, Bella, I tell myself. Grow the fuck up.
And then I run.

Tink

Ten months later

“Suck my diiiiiiiick!”

The voice trails back to me from the bike ahead as it whips between cars down the 303. I grimace, rev, and follow.

Pan’s such an asshole.

“Oh, *very* mature,” someone mutters into the mic. Kit, I think, but maybe Fox—I suck at telling them apart by voice. Doesn’t matter. I say nothing, just focus on gunning it down the asphalt and not getting blinded by the late-afternoon sun.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” crackles a reply. Pan. Wherever he went ahead of us, fastest as ever.

“Yeah, and you’re one to fucking talk, Fox.” *That’s* Kit. I skim past a pickup and take over the lane. The dusty green expanse of the valley stretches hot and dry to my right as I lean into the curve.

“Aw, I’m plenty mature.” Fox. “Someone back me up.”

“No.” That’s Blue.

“I see that and raise you a *hell* no.” Pan.

Fox sighs. “Tink?”

The glare’s torching me in the eyes and I’m sweating under my road jacket besides. I don’t really care, though.

I’m happy.

I rev the throttle. “I’m with Pan.”

Another sigh. “Fuck all of you,” Fox mutters.

“Hard pass.” Pan guns it. “Last one there’s buying!”

Fox is the last one there.

“Sixty-six eighty-three.” The Fill-R-Up girl tosses her ponytail as she rings up the tallboys. The A/C is weak, the air smells like taquitos and sounds like bro-country, and I’ve got my hands in my pockets, studying a rack of air fresheners.

“Aw, for real?” Fox grumbles as he digs around in his wallet. “Shit. I’m short.” He looks up, twisting his head around for his twin, but Kit’s still outside, filling up. “Uh, hang on a sec.”

The Fill-R-Up girl—her nametag says *Rae*—doesn’t answer, isn’t even listening, because Pan’s leaning over the counter. Looking at her.

And suddenly neither Rae nor the girl restocking cigarettes behind her seem to be able to remember what they’re doing.

I continue minding my own business, but glance up at the girls: their cut-crease eyes, their heatless curls, their nail polish. All just to work at the freaking Fill-R-Up.

Meanwhile, I rolled out of bed and pulled on the same pants I wore yesterday...and the day before. My hair’s messed up from my helmet and my lashes haven’t seen mascara in...well, a long time.

And *I’m* the one who’ll be spending the day with four biker boys in leather and road dust.

It really feels like I’m getting away with something. Which I guess I am.

“So you like working here?” Pan is asking the girls. He grins at them, ruffling his hair with his fingers. Right now it’s fire-engine red, stop-sign red, Crayola-crayon red.

On anyone else but him, it’d look ridiculous.

Rae and Lauren blush.

“It’s okay.” Rae speaks up first, twirling a long ponytail strand around her finger.

“Just okay?” Pan looks surprised.

“You meet a lot of people,” Lauren offers.

“I bet,” Pan says. “Anyone interesting?”

Rae and Lauren look at each other. Giggle.

Because...yeah, I’m sure that the five of us are a welcome change from the truckers and night-shift nurses. Five biker boys sauntering in on a slow, dusty afternoon, all gleaming helmets and black leather. For a girl working for minimum wage in the outskirts of London Valley, that’s the stuff dreams are made of.

If I were in their shoes, I’d do the same thing.

“Sometimes,” Rae says at last. Flirtily.

“Okay.” Fox returns, interrupting, oblivious, a fifty in his hand. “We’re good.” He flashes them his big broad grin, which they clearly don’t mind too much either. Fox has a smile that could sell toothpaste and a body that could sell...I don’t know, protein powder, or something. Whatever makes you big and strong like that.

But even for all that, he’s not the big get here, and he knows it. Doesn’t mind it.

Everybody loves Pan.

Everybody.

My heartbeat quickens a little.

"Oh." Rae jolts back to life, blinking. "You want a bag?"

As she busies herself stuffing can after can into the plastic, a single black-gloved hand slams a a pack of jerky on the counter.

"This too." Blue. Mr. Tall, Dark, and Threatening. Helmet still on, visor down. It's at least partially an act, the grumpy asshole thing.

But only partially.

Lauren's eyes drift from the helmet to the jacket to the glimpse of tattoos crawling out from under every edge of his T-shirt.

"Do I know you from somewhere?"

Blue just shrugs.

"I bet you do." Pan grabs the edge of Blue's shirt and yanks it up, flashing his abs for all to see. "Ring a bell?"

"Omigod." Lauren goes white. Rae bugs her eyes out, questioning, and Lauren gives her a definite *I'll tell you later* look in response.

Pan doubles over, cracking up. Blue flips Pan off, but nods to the girls. "Keep the change." He strides off.

"Hey!" Kit appears at my side, frowning. "That was *my* fifty he gave them," he grumbles. But he takes the bag from Rae, and offers me my drink without my asking.

Kit's easy that way. I like that.

"Ask him for a kickback," I tell him, cracking my tallboy and slugging it. "You know, if they subscribe to him after this."

Fox laughs. "Yeah, like a finder's fee."

"More like a pimp." Kit makes a face. "No thanks."

They start bickering back and forth, but I tune it out, because Pan's leaning over the counter again, his gold feather earring dangling, head cocked as he asks the girls some other question.

But then he pauses. Feels my eyes on him.

Looks at me.

I hold his gaze. Not too long. Just long enough to send a message.

To do what I'm here to do.

Keep him on track.

I see my opening and take it. I tap an imaginary watch on my wrist. Raise an eyebrow for good measure.

Pan sighs. "Fine, fine." He rolls his eyes. "Apparently I've got to go."

The girls exchange a look. "Go where?"

"Little League practice," I deadpan, clapping a hand on each of Pan's shoulders and pulling him up. He's kept Krye waiting long enough, and if there's one person you don't want on your bad side, it's the local Albanian mafia kingpin. "He's our star pitcher."

Besides, Pan's in one of his broke phases, and he knows it. If the threat of mob violence won't motivate him, a lack of cash will.

Pan nods. "My man Tink is right. Duty calls." He half-lifts his helmet in a salute. "Been a pleasure, though."

The girls look at each other. A look I know. Each one daring the other to go first.

Lauren seems to win.

"Can..." She sucks in a breath, says her next sentence like it's all one word. "*CanIgetaridesometime?*"

Her eyes are on Pan, but drift up to me, briefly.

I don't give rides. Obviously. But I like knowing I'm under consideration.

Means Tink's doing a good job.

But these girls...

Pan sucks his teeth, fake-deliberating. "Weeeeell..."

"How old are you?" I interrupt. Gruffer than I need to be.

Lauren scowls briefly. Then flushes. "Twenty."

"Bullshit." Rae rolls her eyes. "She's *seventeen*. Same as me." She smiles. "But my birthday's in four months."

Pan catches my eyes, gives me the tiniest wince.

Told you, I telegraph to him.

He's not that much older—we're not, any of us. Least of all me. And he may refuse to act his age, but there are still some lines he won't cross.

It's why I trust him.

Lauren's scowl at Rae deepens. I slug back more of my caffeine. And an idea hits me.

"Hey," I say to Pan, nodding towards the outside. "Is that a kid messing with your bike out there?"

He slumps. "Aw, what the fuck—"

There is no kid, but Pan's territorial enough about his baby to go check anyway, and it'll buy me a minute or two. He jogs out, and I turn back to the counter. Lean on it a little. Don't make eye contact per se but make sure they know I'm giving them my full attention.

They're short, these girls. Petite, as Gram would say. I'm not. That might be the easiest part about being a guy, the part that comes most naturally for me: being nearly six feet, and that's before you add boots.

That, and making dick jokes.

Behind the counter, the greasy rollers are click-click-clicking under their heat lamps, slow-spinning corn dogs.

"Can I get one of those?" I nod.

"Huh?" Lauren blinks. "Oh. Sure." She goes for the tongs. Rae, meanwhile, is craning her neck after Pan. I make a show of following suit, then looking right at her.

"Here's the thing," I make my voice warm and low, older-brother style. "My boy Pan, out there?"

"What?" Rae looks startled. "Oh, um—"

"You want a mini?" Lauren interrupts, from the corn dog machine. "Or a regular?"

"Both," I answer. The bro-country song fades into something 80s-ish, with saxophones. I look back at Rae. "Anyways, he's, uh..." I smirk. "How do I put this?"

Lauren returns with my corn dogs, and I lift them out of their paper boat. To demonstrate.

"You know." I let the full-size dog drop a little so only the teeny one remains upright. "Mini."

Rae's eyes widen. "Nuh-uh," she says, doing a slow shake of her head. But she's smiling.

"Yeah huh," I say. "Like, so much so that it's weird, you know?"

"Oh my *God*," Rae looks at Lauren and they dissolve

I've turned it into a literal dick-measuring contest.

"Don't tell him I told you," I hurry on. "All I'm saying is, maybe go find some nice boys your own age to take you out for a milkshake."

"False alarm," Pan says, striding back in. "Just a..." Seeing the three of us, he stops in his tracks. Frowns. "What are *you* all talking about?"

"Nothing," I say.

Rae and Lauren burst into another round of giggles.

"What?" Pan's smiling, head cocked.

"Nothing," I repeat. Ever so innocent, leaning against the counter. "Just told them about your little... condition."

"My...?"

"Emphasis on *little*," Lauren squeaks, then collapses into laughter again.

Realization dawns. Pan scowls. But he's smiling too. "You bastard. You—"

"Don't worry about it." I'm smiling now, too, because he's smiling, and hold out my hand with an offer to share. "Corn dog?"

Pan responds by grabbing me by the shoulder and steers me towards the exit. "Ladies, excuse us."

"We work 'til close Friday and Saturday," Lauren calls. "Maybe stop by again?"

"Maybe." Pan yells back, with a wink. "Never say never."

Their giddy little shrieks echo with the chime of the entrance as he shoves me the rest of the way out the door.

I stumble, but I'm laughing.

Because mission accomplished. Everyone goes home happy.

Outside, the others are waiting, Fox and Kit leaning idly while Blue's already on his bike, ready to go. The air feels hotter and dryer now, the late afternoon sun baking all of London Valley, and we've got at least another half-hour ride to Krys's.

"Finally." Fox sighs and rolls his mask down his head. "You guys are like girls in the freakin' bathroom."

"Sexist." Kit revs at him.

"You're sexist." Fox revs back, helmet on.

"You got her number?" Blue. Sounding skeptical.

"Yeah," I cut in for Pan. "Seventeen."

Blue barks out a laugh. Fox chuckles, too, and Kit just shakes his head.

Pan swings a leg over his bike, revs it to life, and skids past me *just* close enough to spit a little gravel on my leg.

"Fuck you very much, *Tink*." But he's laughing.

"Thanks for keeping you out of prison, more like." Blue. "Don't be a dipshit."

"Can't help it."

"What happened to don't ask, don't tell?" Fox wonders.

"That's not what that means." Kit sighs.

"Officially bored now. Bye!" Another rev and Pan's rocketing off into the road, barely missing an SUV that leans loudly on the horn.

"Motherfucker," I whisper under my breath. "You got a death wish?" I add, into the mic. I'm ready: helmet snug, jacket zipped, clutch in.

"Pssh." Pan's voice rings in my ear through the mic as I accelerate after him, Blue, Fox, and Kit trailing. "I'm too young to die."

Someone snorts. Kit. "Yeah, okay. What's that saying? Die young, leave a good-looking corpse?"

"Damn." Fox. Tearing up the road to my left, leaning back a little in his seat. "They say that?"

"Only if you're good-looking in the first place." Blue again. "Rules him out."

"Hey!" Pan cries. "I'm pretty. Tink, back me up."

I speed up, skating lane to lane, eating up pavement. Heart racing along with the engine.

"Beautiful," I deadpan. "Stunning."

Pan laughs. "*Thank you.*"

I catch up to Pan. Hang right at his side. Wind whipping over me, blasting the leather surface of my chest, roaring in my ears.

It's all for show, the shit-giving. Even from me.

No sooner do I catch up than Pan zips ahead. Teasing me, baiting me to follow.

I do. Like I always do. The bike hums underneath me, and I try to tune into that instead. It's a good bike, nothing fancy—Kawasaki Ninja, bright green, couple of scratches but and fits me just fine at all of my 5' 11" in boots. Three or four previous owners, according to Fox when he handed it over to me, but *she purrs like a kitten*.

And I do like that. The sound, the speed. How it spins the world away from you.

You ever want to fly, Bella?

I shake the memory away and decel slightly as we knife off the exit to the Hills, the sun glaring directly into my visor.

Those days are long gone.

I ride with the Lost Boys now.

Bella

A pixie cut.

That's what the nurse just called it. The nurse, with her long, long ponytail.

Slowly, tentatively, I run a hand over my head. Over what feels like my *scalp*.

I'd cry if it didn't hurt so much just to breathe.

"I always wished I could pull off short hair," she blathers on. "But you've got the bone structure for a pixie."

A pixie. The name doesn't even make sense. Pixies, fairies, whatever—they never actually have short hair. I think of all the princess stuff in my bedroom back at Gram's, the Barbies and dollar-store picture books. Long hair, always.

And this isn't a pixie cut, anyway. A pixie cut gets done in a beauty parlor. Not the back of an ambulance.

I find my voice. "Can I go yet?"

The emergency department at London Valley Memorial smells like barf and bleach. The lights make

everything look green and the curtains they have between beds don't give anyone any privacy.

Not that I've had any privacy for a while.

The nurse pretends not to hear me. Or maybe she actually doesn't. It's definitely loud enough in here.

"Five-eleven." She blinks at my chart and does a low whistle. "God, I'd *love* to be that tall."

She pauses. Like I'm supposed to congratulate her on being jealous of me. For something I have no control over.

"And you're so *skinny*, too!"

I feel like nurses aren't supposed to say that. But this is a shitty hospital and she's probably a shitty nurse.

"You could model, you know."

That.

Icepick. Stomach.

I can't say anything, I can't react, I can't cry because I can't even get enough air.

So I just ball up the blanket harder in my fist. Keep staring at the ceiling. At the ugly green light. Like it's the morning star.

"Okay, then." The nurse mutters it in a way that I'm not sure I'm supposed to hear. "Well, I am sorry about the wait." She doesn't sound sorry. "The physician will be with you as soon as possible, but I should warn you, we are *very* busy tonight."

She doesn't need to warn me. I saw the waiting room. I can hear all the stretchers banging in down the hall.

“Any new or increased pain since we checked you in?”

I shake my head.

“Okay. If you feel sharp pain or feel like you’re losing consciousness—”

“Can I at least take this off?” I don’t even know what it’s called. I just know I can barely breathe.

She smiles. Like I’m stupid for not knowing what the beige plastic-and-velcro thing smashing down my chest is called. “The support binder,” she says. “The physician will go over all of that when he arrives.”

When he arrives.

He.

“Okay, but...” My voice sounds craggy. I swallow. “Can you, like, ballpark it?”

“Unfortunately, I’m not able to speculate about treatment, diagnosis, or recovery times.” She sounds all smug about it. I bet she was a mean girl in high school. “You did sustain some severe injuries to the ribs and sternum and for the time being it’s very important that the fractures remain stabilized.”

She’s got on pink scrubs. A pink headband. That long, long ponytail.

“If you want, you can ask the physician when he —”

Never fucking mind. I close my eyes and sink into the pillow. I’m trying to tune things out, when—

“Someone called for victim’s advocate?” The charge nurse, the one that barks everything she says. “LVPD actually sent someone for once.”

I open my eyes again.

No answer. Then the charge nurse again.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you, honey. It's Friday fucking night in the Valley and this is the emergency department. Everyone here's a victim of something. You got a name, or anything?"

You bitch. You murdering bitch.

You fucking killed him.

I am gonna drag your skinny ass in on murder charges. Make no mistake, I am going to get the fucking cops in here and—

Headrush when I stand up. I grab my sweatshirt from the chair. There's enough people walking back and forth that I make it to the end of the hall.

"Bella?"

Nurse Chelsea. I think fast. "Ladies' room?"

She relaxes a little. I'm not here to bother her. "Around the corner."

She points. I walk.

I'm not going to the ladies' room. I don't turn the corner at all, but she doesn't notice or doesn't care. Instead I keep going straight, straight on to the waiting room, to the sliding glass doors, to the outside.

The parking lot's dark. London Valley never gets cold, not really, but when the sun goes down there's a chill in the air, like the blue of the sky is freezing downward to earth.

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The nursery rhyme goes off in my head, automatic.
Stupid.
Grow up, Bella, I tell myself. Grow the fuck up.
And then I run.

Tink

Ten months later

“Suck my diiiiiiiick!”

The voice trails back to me from the bike ahead as it whips between cars down the 303. I grimace, rev, and follow.

Pan’s such an asshole.

“Oh, *very* mature,” someone mutters into the mic. Kit, I think, but maybe Fox—I suck at telling them apart by voice. Doesn’t matter. I say nothing, just focus on gunning it down the asphalt and not getting blinded by the late-afternoon sun.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” crackles a reply. Pan. Wherever he went ahead of us, fastest as ever.

“Yeah, and you’re one to fucking talk, Fox.” *That’s* Kit. I skim past a pickup and take over the lane. The dusty green expanse of the valley stretches hot and dry to my right as I lean into the curve.

“Aw, I’m plenty mature.” Fox. “Someone back me up.”

“No.” That’s Blue.

“I see that and raise you a *hell* no.” Pan.

Fox sighs. “Tink?”

The glare’s torching me in the eyes and I’m sweating under my road jacket besides. I don’t really care, though.

I’m happy.

I rev the throttle. “I’m with Pan.”

Another sigh. “Fuck all of you,” Fox mutters.

“Hard pass.” Pan guns it. “Last one there’s buying!”

Fox is the last one there.

“Sixty-six eighty-three.” The Fill-R-Up girl tosses her ponytail as she rings up the tallboys. The A/C is weak, the air smells like taquitos and sounds like bro-country, and I’ve got my hands in my pockets, studying a rack of air fresheners.

“Aw, for real?” Fox grumbles as he digs around in his wallet. “Shit. I’m short.” He looks up, twisting his head around for his twin, but Kit’s still outside, filling up. “Uh, hang on a sec.”

The Fill-R-Up girl—her nametag says *Rae*—doesn’t answer, isn’t even listening, because Pan’s leaning over the counter. Looking at her.

And suddenly neither Rae nor the girl restocking cigarettes behind her seem to be able to remember what they’re doing.

I continue minding my own business, but glance up at the girls: their cut-crease eyes, their heatless curls, their nail polish. All just to work at the freaking Fill-R-Up.

Meanwhile, I rolled out of bed and pulled on the same pants I wore yesterday...and the day before. My hair’s messed up from my helmet and my lashes haven’t seen mascara in...well, a long time.

And *I’m* the one who’ll be spending the day with four biker boys in leather and road dust.

It really feels like I’m getting away with something. Which I guess I am.

“So you like working here?” Pan is asking the girls. He grins at them, ruffling his hair with his fingers. Right now it’s fire-engine red, stop-sign red, Crayola-crayon red.

On anyone else but him, it’d look ridiculous.

Rae and Lauren blush.

“It’s okay.” Rae speaks up first, twirling a long ponytail strand around her finger.

“Just okay?” Pan looks surprised.

“You meet a lot of people,” Lauren offers.

“I bet,” Pan says. “Anyone interesting?”

Rae and Lauren look at each other. Giggle.

Because...yeah, I’m sure that the five of us are a welcome change from the truckers and night-shift nurses. Five biker boys sauntering in on a slow, dusty afternoon, all gleaming helmets and black leather. For a girl working for minimum wage in the outskirts of London Valley, that’s the stuff dreams are made of.

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Everybody loves Pan.

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Besides, Pan’s in one of his broke phases, and he knows it. If the threat of mob violence won’t motivate him, a lack of cash will.

Pan nods. "My man Tink is right. Duty calls." He half-lifts his helmet in a salute. "Been a pleasure, though."

The girls look at each other. A look I know. Each one daring the other to go first.

Lauren seems to win.

"Can..." She sucks in a breath, says her next sentence like it's all one word. "*CanIgetaridesometime?*"

Her eyes are on Pan, but drift up to me, briefly.

I don't give rides. Obviously. But I like knowing I'm under consideration.

Means Tink's doing a good job.

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Pan catches my eyes, gives me the tiniest wince.

Told you, I telegraph to him.

He's not that much older—we're not, any of us. Least of all me. And he may refuse to act his age, but there are still some lines he won't cross.

It's why I trust him.

Lauren's scowl at Rae deepens. I slug back more of my caffeine. And an idea hits me.

"Hey," I say to Pan, nodding towards the outside. "Is that a kid messing with your bike out there?"

He slumps. "Aw, what the fuck—"

There is no kid, but Pan's territorial enough about his baby to go check anyway, and it'll buy me a minute or two. He jogs out, and I turn back to the counter. Lean on it a little. Don't make eye contact per se but make sure they know I'm giving them my full attention.

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"Both," I answer. The bro-country song fades into something 80s-ish, with saxophones. I look back at Rae. "Anyways, he's, uh..." I smirk. "How do I put this?"

Lauren returns with my corn dogs, and I lift them out of their paper boat. To demonstrate.

"You know." I let the full-size dog drop a little so only the teeny one remains upright. "Mini."

Rae's eyes widen. "Nuh-uh," she says, doing a slow shake of her head. But she's smiling.

"Yeah huh," I say. "Like, so much so that it's weird, you know?"

"Oh my *God*," Rae looks at Lauren and they dissolve

I've turned it into a literal dick-measuring contest.

"Don't tell him I told you," I hurry on. "All I'm saying is, maybe go find some nice boys your own age to take you out for a milkshake."

"False alarm," Pan says, striding back in. "Just a..." Seeing the three of us, he stops in his tracks. Frowns. "What are *you* all talking about?"

"Nothing," I say.

Rae and Lauren burst into another round of giggles.

"What?" Pan's smiling, head cocked.

"Nothing," I repeat. Ever so innocent, leaning against the counter. "Just told them about your little... condition."

"My...?"

"Emphasis on *little*," Lauren squeaks, then collapses into laughter again.

Realization dawns. Pan scowls. But he's smiling too. "You bastard. You—"

"Don't worry about it." I'm smiling now, too, because he's smiling, and hold out my hand with an offer to share. "Corn dog?"

Pan responds by grabbing me by the shoulder and steers me towards the exit. "Ladies, excuse us."

"We work 'til close Friday and Saturday," Lauren calls. "Maybe stop by again?"

"Maybe." Pan yells back, with a wink. "Never say never."

Their giddy little shrieks echo with the chime of the entrance as he shoves me the rest of the way out the door.

I stumble, but I'm laughing.

Because mission accomplished. Everyone goes home happy.

Outside, the others are waiting, Fox and Kit leaning idly while Blue's already on his bike, ready to go. The air feels hotter and dryer now, the late afternoon sun baking all of London Valley, and we've got at least another half-hour ride to Krys's.

"Finally." Fox sighs and rolls his mask down his head. "You guys are like girls in the freakin' bathroom."

"Sexist." Kit revs at him.

"You're sexist." Fox revs back, helmet on.

"You got her number?" Blue. Sounding skeptical.

"Yeah," I cut in for Pan. "Seventeen."

Blue barks out a laugh. Fox chuckles, too, and Kit just shakes his head.

Pan swings a leg over his bike, revs it to life, and skids past me *just* close enough to spit a little gravel on my leg.

"Fuck you very much, *Tink*." But he's laughing.

"Thanks for keeping you out of prison, more like." Blue. "Don't be a dipshit."

"Can't help it."

"What happened to don't ask, don't tell?" Fox wonders.

"That's not what that means." Kit sighs.

"Officially bored now. Bye!" Another rev and Pan's rocketing off into the road, barely missing an SUV that leans loudly on the horn.

"Motherfucker," I whisper under my breath. "You got a death wish?" I add, into the mic. I'm ready: helmet snug, jacket zipped, clutch in.

"Pssh." Pan's voice rings in my ear through the mic as I accelerate after him, Blue, Fox, and Kit trailing. "I'm too young to die."

Someone snorts. Kit. "Yeah, okay. What's that saying? Die young, leave a good-looking corpse?"

"Damn." Fox. Tearing up the road to my left, leaning back a little in his seat. "They say that?"

"Only if you're good-looking in the first place." Blue again. "Rules him out."

"Hey!" Pan cries. "I'm pretty. Tink, back me up."

I speed up, skating lane to lane, eating up pavement. Heart racing along with the engine.

"Beautiful," I deadpan. "Stunning."

Pan laughs. "*Thank you.*"

I catch up to Pan. Hang right at his side. Wind whipping over me, blasting the leather surface of my chest, roaring in my ears.

It's all for show, the shit-giving. Even from me.

No sooner do I catch up than Pan zips ahead. Teasing me, baiting me to follow.

I do. Like I always do. The bike hums underneath me, and I try to tune into that instead. It's a good bike, nothing fancy—Kawasaki Ninja, bright green, couple of scratches but and fits me just fine at all of my 5' 11" in boots. Three or four previous owners, according to Fox when he handed it over to me, but *she purrs like a kitten*.

And I do like that. The sound, the speed. How it spins the world away from you.

You ever want to fly, Bella?

I shake the memory away and decel slightly as we knife off the exit to the Hills, the sun glaring directly into my visor.

Those days are long gone.

I ride with the Lost Boys now.

Bella

A pixie cut.

That's what the nurse just called it. The nurse, with her long, long ponytail.

Slowly, tentatively, I run a hand over my head. Over what feels like my *scalp*.

I'd cry if it didn't hurt so much just to breathe.

"I always wished I could pull off short hair," she blathers on. "But you've got the bone structure for a pixie."

A pixie. The name doesn't even make sense. Pixies, fairies, whatever—they never actually have short hair. I think of all the princess stuff in my bedroom back at Gram's, the Barbies and dollar-store picture books. Long hair, always.

And this isn't a pixie cut, anyway. A pixie cut gets done in a beauty parlor. Not the back of an ambulance.

I find my voice. "Can I go yet?"

The emergency department at London Valley Memorial smells like barf and bleach. The lights make

everything look green and the curtains they have between beds don't give anyone any privacy.

Not that I've had any privacy for a while.

The nurse pretends not to hear me. Or maybe she actually doesn't. It's definitely loud enough in here.

"Five-eleven." She blinks at my chart and does a low whistle. "God, I'd *love* to be that tall."

She pauses. Like I'm supposed to congratulate her on being jealous of me. For something I have no control over.

"And you're so *skinny*, too!"

I feel like nurses aren't supposed to say that. But this is a shitty hospital and she's probably a shitty nurse.

"You could model, you know."

That.

Icepick. Stomach.

I can't say anything, I can't react, I can't cry because I can't even get enough air.

So I just ball up the blanket harder in my fist. Keep staring at the ceiling. At the ugly green light. Like it's the morning star.

"Okay, then." The nurse mutters it in a way that I'm not sure I'm supposed to hear. "Well, I am sorry about the wait." She doesn't sound sorry. "The physician will be with you as soon as possible, but I should warn you, we are *very* busy tonight."

She doesn't need to warn me. I saw the waiting room. I can hear all the stretchers banging in down the hall.

“Any new or increased pain since we checked you in?”

I shake my head.

“Okay. If you feel sharp pain or feel like you’re losing consciousness—”

“Can I at least take this off?” I don’t even know what it’s called. I just know I can barely breathe.

She smiles. Like I’m stupid for not knowing what the beige plastic-and-velcro thing smashing down my chest is called. “The support binder,” she says. “The physician will go over all of that when he arrives.”

When he arrives.

He.

“Okay, but...” My voice sounds craggy. I swallow. “Can you, like, ballpark it?”

“Unfortunately, I’m not able to speculate about treatment, diagnosis, or recovery times.” She sounds all smug about it. I bet she was a mean girl in high school. “You did sustain some severe injuries to the ribs and sternum and for the time being it’s very important that the fractures remain stabilized.”

She’s got on pink scrubs. A pink headband. That long, long ponytail.

“If you want, you can ask the physician when he —”

Never fucking mind. I close my eyes and sink into the pillow. I’m trying to tune things out, when—

“Someone called for victim’s advocate?” The charge nurse, the one that barks everything she says. “LVPD actually sent someone for once.”

I open my eyes again.

No answer. Then the charge nurse again.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you, honey. It's Friday fucking night in the Valley and this is the emergency department. Everyone here's a victim of something. You got a name, or anything?"

You bitch. You murdering bitch.

You fucking killed him.

I am gonna drag your skinny ass in on murder charges. Make no mistake, I am going to get the fucking cops in here and—

Headrush when I stand up. I grab my sweatshirt from the chair. There's enough people walking back and forth that I make it to the end of the hall.

"Bella?"

Nurse Chelsea. I think fast. "Ladies' room?"

She relaxes a little. I'm not here to bother her. "Around the corner."

She points. I walk.

I'm not going to the ladies' room. I don't turn the corner at all, but she doesn't notice or doesn't care. Instead I keep going straight, straight on to the waiting room, to the sliding glass doors, to the outside.

The parking lot's dark. London Valley never gets cold, not really, but when the sun goes down there's a chill in the air, like the blue of the sky is freezing downward to earth.

I look up. Look up and take as deep a breath as I can under this stupid binder.

There's stars out.

Bella

Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight...
The nursery rhyme goes off in my head, automatic.
Stupid.
Grow up, Bella, I tell myself. Grow the fuck up.
And then I run.

Tink

Ten months later

“Suck my diiiiiiiick!”

The voice trails back to me from the bike ahead as it whips between cars down the 303. I grimace, rev, and follow.

Pan’s such an asshole.

“Oh, *very* mature,” someone mutters into the mic. Kit, I think, but maybe Fox—I suck at telling them apart by voice. Doesn’t matter. I say nothing, just focus on gunning it down the asphalt and not getting blinded by the late-afternoon sun.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” crackles a reply. Pan. Wherever he went ahead of us, fastest as ever.

“Yeah, and you’re one to fucking talk, Fox.” *That’s* Kit. I skim past a pickup and take over the lane. The dusty green expanse of the valley stretches hot and dry to my right as I lean into the curve.

“Aw, I’m plenty mature.” Fox. “Someone back me up.”

“No.” That’s Blue.

“I see that and raise you a *hell* no.” Pan.

Fox sighs. “Tink?”

The glare’s torching me in the eyes and I’m sweating under my road jacket besides. I don’t really care, though.

I’m happy.

I rev the throttle. “I’m with Pan.”

Another sigh. “Fuck all of you,” Fox mutters.

“Hard pass.” Pan guns it. “Last one there’s buying!”

Fox is the last one there.

“Sixty-six eighty-three.” The Fill-R-Up girl tosses her ponytail as she rings up the tallboys. The A/C is weak, the air smells like taquitos and sounds like bro-country, and I’ve got my hands in my pockets, studying a rack of air fresheners.

“Aw, for real?” Fox grumbles as he digs around in his wallet. “Shit. I’m short.” He looks up, twisting his head around for his twin, but Kit’s still outside, filling up. “Uh, hang on a sec.”

The Fill-R-Up girl—her nametag says *Rae*—doesn’t answer, isn’t even listening, because Pan’s leaning over the counter. Looking at her.

And suddenly neither Rae nor the girl restocking cigarettes behind her seem to be able to remember what they’re doing.

I continue minding my own business, but glance up at the girls: their cut-crease eyes, their heatless curls, their nail polish. All just to work at the freaking Fill-R-Up.

Meanwhile, I rolled out of bed and pulled on the same pants I wore yesterday...and the day before. My hair’s messed up from my helmet and my lashes haven’t seen mascara in...well, a long time.

And *I’m* the one who’ll be spending the day with four biker boys in leather and road dust.

It really feels like I’m getting away with something. Which I guess I am.

“So you like working here?” Pan is asking the girls. He grins at them, ruffling his hair with his fingers. Right now it’s fire-engine red, stop-sign red, Crayola-crayon red.

On anyone else but him, it’d look ridiculous.

Rae and Lauren blush.

“It’s okay.” Rae speaks up first, twirling a long ponytail strand around her finger.

“Just okay?” Pan looks surprised.

“You meet a lot of people,” Lauren offers.

“I bet,” Pan says. “Anyone interesting?”

Rae and Lauren look at each other. Giggle.

Because...yeah, I’m sure that the five of us are a welcome change from the truckers and night-shift nurses. Five biker boys sauntering in on a slow, dusty afternoon, all gleaming helmets and black leather. For a girl working for minimum wage in the outskirts of London Valley, that’s the stuff dreams are made of.

If I were in their shoes, I’d do the same thing.

“Sometimes,” Rae says at last. Flirtily.

“Okay.” Fox returns, interrupting, oblivious, a fifty in his hand. “We’re good.” He flashes them his big broad grin, which they clearly don’t mind too much either. Fox has a smile that could sell toothpaste and a body that could sell...I don’t know, protein powder, or something. Whatever makes you big and strong like that.

But even for all that, he’s not the big get here, and he knows it. Doesn’t mind it.

Everybody loves Pan.

Everybody.

My heartbeat quickens a little.

"Oh." Rae jolts back to life, blinking. "You want a bag?"

As she busies herself stuffing can after can into the plastic, a single black-gloved hand slams a a pack of jerky on the counter.

"This too." Blue. Mr. Tall, Dark, and Threatening. Helmet still on, visor down. It's at least partially an act, the grumpy asshole thing.

But only partially.

Lauren's eyes drift from the helmet to the jacket to the glimpse of tattoos crawling out from under every edge of his T-shirt.

"Do I know you from somewhere?"

Blue just shrugs.

"I bet you do." Pan grabs the edge of Blue's shirt and yanks it up, flashing his abs for all to see. "Ring a bell?"

"Omigod." Lauren goes white. Rae bugs her eyes out, questioning, and Lauren gives her a definite *I'll tell you later* look in response.

Pan doubles over, cracking up. Blue flips Pan off, but nods to the girls. "Keep the change." He strides off.

"Hey!" Kit appears at my side, frowning. "That was *my* fifty he gave them," he grumbles. But he takes the bag from Rae, and offers me my drink without my asking.

Kit's easy that way. I like that.

"Ask him for a kickback," I tell him, cracking my tallboy and slugging it. "You know, if they subscribe to him after this."

Fox laughs. "Yeah, like a finder's fee."

"More like a pimp." Kit makes a face. "No thanks."

They start bickering back and forth, but I tune it out, because Pan's leaning over the counter again, his gold feather earring dangling, head cocked as he asks the girls some other question.

But then he pauses. Feels my eyes on him.

Looks at me.

I hold his gaze. Not too long. Just long enough to send a message.

To do what I'm here to do.

Keep him on track.

I see my opening and take it. I tap an imaginary watch on my wrist. Raise an eyebrow for good measure.

Pan sighs. "Fine, fine." He rolls his eyes. "Apparently I've got to go."

The girls exchange a look. "Go where?"

"Little League practice," I deadpan, clapping a hand on each of Pan's shoulders and pulling him up. He's kept Krye waiting long enough, and if there's one person you don't want on your bad side, it's the local Albanian mafia kingpin. "He's our star pitcher."

Besides, Pan's in one of his broke phases, and he knows it. If the threat of mob violence won't motivate him, a lack of cash will.

Pan nods. "My man Tink is right. Duty calls." He half-lifts his helmet in a salute. "Been a pleasure, though."

The girls look at each other. A look I know. Each one daring the other to go first.

Lauren seems to win.

"Can..." She sucks in a breath, says her next sentence like it's all one word. "*CanIgetaridesometime?*"

Her eyes are on Pan, but drift up to me, briefly.

I don't give rides. Obviously. But I like knowing I'm under consideration.

Means Tink's doing a good job.

But these girls...

Pan sucks his teeth, fake-deliberating. "Weeeeell..."

"How old are you?" I interrupt. Gruffer than I need to be.

Lauren scowls briefly. Then flushes. "Twenty."

"Bullshit." Rae rolls her eyes. "She's *seventeen*. Same as me." She smiles. "But my birthday's in four months."

Pan catches my eyes, gives me the tiniest wince.

Told you, I telegraph to him.

He's not that much older—we're not, any of us. Least of all me. And he may refuse to act his age, but there are still some lines he won't cross.

It's why I trust him.

Lauren's scowl at Rae deepens. I slug back more of my caffeine. And an idea hits me.

"Hey," I say to Pan, nodding towards the outside. "Is that a kid messing with your bike out there?"

He slumps. "Aw, what the fuck—"

There is no kid, but Pan's territorial enough about his baby to go check anyway, and it'll buy me a minute or two. He jogs out, and I turn back to the counter. Lean on it a little. Don't make eye contact per se but make sure they know I'm giving them my full attention.

They're short, these girls. Petite, as Gram would say. I'm not. That might be the easiest part about being a guy, the part that comes most naturally for me: being nearly six feet, and that's before you add boots.

That, and making dick jokes.

Behind the counter, the greasy rollers are click-click-clicking under their heat lamps, slow-spinning corn dogs.

"Can I get one of those?" I nod.

"Huh?" Lauren blinks. "Oh. Sure." She goes for the tongs. Rae, meanwhile, is craning her neck after Pan. I make a show of following suit, then looking right at her.

"Here's the thing," I make my voice warm and low, older-brother style. "My boy Pan, out there?"

"What?" Rae looks startled. "Oh, um—"

"You want a mini?" Lauren interrupts, from the corn dog machine. "Or a regular?"

"Both," I answer. The bro-country song fades into something 80s-ish, with saxophones. I look back at Rae. "Anyways, he's, uh..." I smirk. "How do I put this?"

Lauren returns with my corn dogs, and I lift them out of their paper boat. To demonstrate.

"You know." I let the full-size dog drop a little so only the teeny one remains upright. "Mini."

Rae's eyes widen. "Nuh-uh," she says, doing a slow shake of her head. But she's smiling.

"Yeah huh," I say. "Like, so much so that it's weird, you know?"

"Oh my *God*," Rae looks at Lauren and they dissolve

I've turned it into a literal dick-measuring contest.

"Don't tell him I told you," I hurry on. "All I'm saying is, maybe go find some nice boys your own age to take you out for a milkshake."

"False alarm," Pan says, striding back in. "Just a..." Seeing the three of us, he stops in his tracks. Frowns. "What are *you* all talking about?"

"Nothing," I say.

Rae and Lauren burst into another round of giggles.

"What?" Pan's smiling, head cocked.

"Nothing," I repeat. Ever so innocent, leaning against the counter. "Just told them about your little... condition."

"My...?"

"Emphasis on *little*," Lauren squeaks, then collapses into laughter again.

Realization dawns. Pan scowls. But he's smiling too. "You bastard. You—"

"Don't worry about it." I'm smiling now, too, because he's smiling, and hold out my hand with an offer to share. "Corn dog?"

Pan responds by grabbing me by the shoulder and steers me towards the exit. "Ladies, excuse us."

"We work 'til close Friday and Saturday," Lauren calls. "Maybe stop by again?"

"Maybe." Pan yells back, with a wink. "Never say never."

Their giddy little shrieks echo with the chime of the entrance as he shoves me the rest of the way out the door.

I stumble, but I'm laughing.

Because mission accomplished. Everyone goes home happy.

Outside, the others are waiting, Fox and Kit leaning idly while Blue's already on his bike, ready to go. The air feels hotter and dryer now, the late afternoon sun baking all of London Valley, and we've got at least another half-hour ride to Krye's.

"Finally." Fox sighs and rolls his mask down his head. "You guys are like girls in the freakin' bathroom."

"Sexist." Kit revs at him.

"You're sexist." Fox revs back, helmet on.

"You got her number?" Blue. Sounding skeptical.

"Yeah," I cut in for Pan. "Seventeen."

Blue barks out a laugh. Fox chuckles, too, and Kit just shakes his head.

Pan swings a leg over his bike, revs it to life, and skids past me *just* close enough to spit a little gravel on my leg.

"Fuck you very much, *Tink*." But he's laughing.

"Thanks for keeping you out of prison, more like." Blue. "Don't be a dipshit."

"Can't help it."

"What happened to don't ask, don't tell?" Fox wonders.

"That's not what that means." Kit sighs.

"Officially bored now. Bye!" Another rev and Pan's rocketing off into the road, barely missing an SUV that leans loudly on the horn.

"Motherfucker," I whisper under my breath. "You got a death wish?" I add, into the mic. I'm ready: helmet snug, jacket zipped, clutch in.

"Pssh." Pan's voice rings in my ear through the mic as I accelerate after him, Blue, Fox, and Kit trailing. "I'm too young to die."

Someone snorts. Kit. "Yeah, okay. What's that saying? Die young, leave a good-looking corpse?"

"Damn." Fox. Tearing up the road to my left, leaning back a little in his seat. "They say that?"

"Only if you're good-looking in the first place." Blue again. "Rules him out."

"Hey!" Pan cries. "I'm pretty. Tink, back me up."

I speed up, skating lane to lane, eating up pavement. Heart racing along with the engine.

"Beautiful," I deadpan. "Stunning."

Pan laughs. "*Thank you.*"

I catch up to Pan. Hang right at his side. Wind whipping over me, blasting the leather surface of my chest, roaring in my ears.

It's all for show, the shit-giving. Even from me.

No sooner do I catch up than Pan zips ahead. Teasing me, baiting me to follow.

I do. Like I always do. The bike hums underneath me, and I try to tune into that instead. It's a good bike, nothing fancy—Kawasaki Ninja, bright green, couple of scratches but and fits me just fine at all of my 5' 11" in boots. Three or four previous owners, according to Fox when he handed it over to me, but *she purrs like a kitten*.

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Those days are long gone.

I ride with the Lost Boys now.

Bella

A pixie cut.

That's what the nurse just called it. The nurse, with her long, long ponytail.

Slowly, tentatively, I run a hand over my head. Over what feels like my *scalp*.

I'd cry if it didn't hurt so much just to breathe.

"I always wished I could pull off short hair," she blathers on. "But you've got the bone structure for a pixie."

A pixie. The name doesn't even make sense. Pixies, fairies, whatever—they never actually have short hair. I think of all the princess stuff in my bedroom back at Gram's, the Barbies and dollar-store picture books. Long hair, always.

And this isn't a pixie cut, anyway. A pixie cut gets done in a beauty parlor. Not the back of an ambulance.

I find my voice. "Can I go yet?"

The emergency department at London Valley Memorial smells like barf and bleach. The lights make

everything look green and the curtains they have between beds don't give anyone any privacy.

Not that I've had any privacy for a while.

The nurse pretends not to hear me. Or maybe she actually doesn't. It's definitely loud enough in here.

"Five-eleven." She blinks at my chart and does a low whistle. "God, I'd *love* to be that tall."

She pauses. Like I'm supposed to congratulate her on being jealous of me. For something I have no control over.

"And you're so *skinny*, too!"

I feel like nurses aren't supposed to say that. But this is a shitty hospital and she's probably a shitty nurse.

"You could model, you know."

That.

Icepick. Stomach.

I can't say anything, I can't react, I can't cry because I can't even get enough air.

So I just ball up the blanket harder in my fist. Keep staring at the ceiling. At the ugly green light. Like it's the morning star.

"Okay, then." The nurse mutters it in a way that I'm not sure I'm supposed to hear. "Well, I am sorry about the wait." She doesn't sound sorry. "The physician will be with you as soon as possible, but I should warn you, we are *very* busy tonight."

She doesn't need to warn me. I saw the waiting room. I can hear all the stretchers banging in down the hall.

“Any new or increased pain since we checked you in?”

I shake my head.

“Okay. If you feel sharp pain or feel like you’re losing consciousness—”

“Can I at least take this off?” I don’t even know what it’s called. I just know I can barely breathe.

She smiles. Like I’m stupid for not knowing what the beige plastic-and-velcro thing smashing down my chest is called. “The support binder,” she says. “The physician will go over all of that when he arrives.”

When he arrives.

He.

“Okay, but...” My voice sounds craggy. I swallow. “Can you, like, ballpark it?”

“Unfortunately, I’m not able to speculate about treatment, diagnosis, or recovery times.” She sounds all smug about it. I bet she was a mean girl in high school. “You did sustain some severe injuries to the ribs and sternum and for the time being it’s very important that the fractures remain stabilized.”

She’s got on pink scrubs. A pink headband. That long, long ponytail.

“If you want, you can ask the physician when he —”

Never fucking mind. I close my eyes and sink into the pillow. I’m trying to tune things out, when—

“Someone called for victim’s advocate?” The charge nurse, the one that barks everything she says. “LVPD actually sent someone for once.”

I open my eyes again.

No answer. Then the charge nurse again.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you, honey. It's Friday fucking night in the Valley and this is the emergency department. Everyone here's a victim of something. You got a name, or anything?"

You bitch. You murdering bitch.

You fucking killed him.

I am gonna drag your skinny ass in on murder charges. Make no mistake, I am going to get the fucking cops in here and—

Headrush when I stand up. I grab my sweatshirt from the chair. There's enough people walking back and forth that I make it to the end of the hall.

"Bella?"

Nurse Chelsea. I think fast. "Ladies' room?"

She relaxes a little. I'm not here to bother her. "Around the corner."

She points. I walk.

I'm not going to the ladies' room. I don't turn the corner at all, but she doesn't notice or doesn't care. Instead I keep going straight, straight on to the waiting room, to the sliding glass doors, to the outside.

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And then I run.

Tink

Ten months later

“Suck my diiiiiiiick!”

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Pan’s such an asshole.

“Oh, *very* mature,” someone mutters into the mic. Kit, I think, but maybe Fox—I suck at telling them apart by voice. Doesn’t matter. I say nothing, just focus on gunning it down the asphalt and not getting blinded by the late-afternoon sun.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” crackles a reply. Pan. Wherever he went ahead of us, fastest as ever.

“Yeah, and you’re one to fucking talk, Fox.” *That’s* Kit. I skim past a pickup and take over the lane. The dusty green expanse of the valley stretches hot and dry to my right as I lean into the curve.

“Aw, I’m plenty mature.” Fox. “Someone back me up.”

“No.” That’s Blue.

“I see that and raise you a *hell* no.” Pan.

Fox sighs. “Tink?”

The glare’s torching me in the eyes and I’m sweating under my road jacket besides. I don’t really care, though.

I’m happy.

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Fox is the last one there.

“Sixty-six eighty-three.” The Fill-R-Up girl tosses her ponytail as she rings up the tallboys. The A/C is weak, the air smells like taquitos and sounds like bro-country, and I’ve got my hands in my pockets, studying a rack of air fresheners.

“Aw, for real?” Fox grumbles as he digs around in his wallet. “Shit. I’m short.” He looks up, twisting his head around for his twin, but Kit’s still outside, filling up. “Uh, hang on a sec.”

The Fill-R-Up girl—her nametag says *Rae*—doesn’t answer, isn’t even listening, because Pan’s leaning over the counter. Looking at her.

And suddenly neither Rae nor the girl restocking cigarettes behind her seem to be able to remember what they’re doing.

I continue minding my own business, but glance up at the girls: their cut-crease eyes, their heatless curls, their nail polish. All just to work at the freaking Fill-R-Up.

Meanwhile, I rolled out of bed and pulled on the same pants I wore yesterday...and the day before. My hair’s messed up from my helmet and my lashes haven’t seen mascara in...well, a long time.

And *I’m* the one who’ll be spending the day with four biker boys in leather and road dust.

It really feels like I’m getting away with something. Which I guess I am.

“So you like working here?” Pan is asking the girls. He grins at them, ruffling his hair with his fingers. Right now it’s fire-engine red, stop-sign red, Crayola-crayon red.

On anyone else but him, it’d look ridiculous.

Rae and Lauren blush.

“It’s okay.” Rae speaks up first, twirling a long ponytail strand around her finger.

“Just okay?” Pan looks surprised.

“You meet a lot of people,” Lauren offers.

“I bet,” Pan says. “Anyone interesting?”

Rae and Lauren look at each other. Giggle.

Because...yeah, I’m sure that the five of us are a welcome change from the truckers and night-shift nurses. Five biker boys sauntering in on a slow, dusty afternoon, all gleaming helmets and black leather. For a girl working for minimum wage in the outskirts of London Valley, that’s the stuff dreams are made of.

If I were in their shoes, I’d do the same thing.

“Sometimes,” Rae says at last. Flirtily.

“Okay.” Fox returns, interrupting, oblivious, a fifty in his hand. “We’re good.” He flashes them his big broad grin, which they clearly don’t mind too much either. Fox has a smile that could sell toothpaste and a body that could sell...I don’t know, protein powder, or something. Whatever makes you big and strong like that.

But even for all that, he’s not the big get here, and he knows it. Doesn’t mind it.

Everybody loves Pan.

Everybody.

My heartbeat quickens a little.

"Oh." Rae jolts back to life, blinking. "You want a bag?"

As she busies herself stuffing can after can into the plastic, a single black-gloved hand slams a a pack of jerky on the counter.

"This too." Blue. Mr. Tall, Dark, and Threatening. Helmet still on, visor down. It's at least partially an act, the grumpy asshole thing.

But only partially.

Lauren's eyes drift from the helmet to the jacket to the glimpse of tattoos crawling out from under every edge of his T-shirt.

"Do I know you from somewhere?"

Blue just shrugs.

"I bet you do." Pan grabs the edge of Blue's shirt and yanks it up, flashing his abs for all to see. "Ring a bell?"

"Omigod." Lauren goes white. Rae bugs her eyes out, questioning, and Lauren gives her a definite *I'll tell you later* look in response.

Pan doubles over, cracking up. Blue flips Pan off, but nods to the girls. "Keep the change." He strides off.

"Hey!" Kit appears at my side, frowning. "That was *my* fifty he gave them," he grumbles. But he takes the bag from Rae, and offers me my drink without my asking.

Kit's easy that way. I like that.

"Ask him for a kickback," I tell him, cracking my tallboy and slugging it. "You know, if they subscribe to him after this."

Fox laughs. "Yeah, like a finder's fee."

"More like a pimp." Kit makes a face. "No thanks."

They start bickering back and forth, but I tune it out, because Pan's leaning over the counter again, his gold feather earring dangling, head cocked as he asks the girls some other question.

But then he pauses. Feels my eyes on him.

Looks at me.

I hold his gaze. Not too long. Just long enough to send a message.

To do what I'm here to do.

Keep him on track.

I see my opening and take it. I tap an imaginary watch on my wrist. Raise an eyebrow for good measure.

Pan sighs. "Fine, fine." He rolls his eyes. "Apparently I've got to go."

The girls exchange a look. "Go where?"

"Little League practice," I deadpan, clapping a hand on each of Pan's shoulders and pulling him up. He's kept Krye waiting long enough, and if there's one person you don't want on your bad side, it's the local Albanian mafia kingpin. "He's our star pitcher."

Besides, Pan's in one of his broke phases, and he knows it. If the threat of mob violence won't motivate him, a lack of cash will.

Pan nods. "My man Tink is right. Duty calls." He half-lifts his helmet in a salute. "Been a pleasure, though."

The girls look at each other. A look I know. Each one daring the other to go first.

Lauren seems to win.

"Can..." She sucks in a breath, says her next sentence like it's all one word. "*CanIgetaridesometime?*"

Her eyes are on Pan, but drift up to me, briefly.

I don't give rides. Obviously. But I like knowing I'm under consideration.

Means Tink's doing a good job.

But these girls...

Pan sucks his teeth, fake-deliberating. "Weeeeell..."

"How old are you?" I interrupt. Gruffer than I need to be.

Lauren scowls briefly. Then flushes. "Twenty."

"Bullshit." Rae rolls her eyes. "She's *seventeen*. Same as me." She smiles. "But my birthday's in four months."

Pan catches my eyes, gives me the tiniest wince.

Told you, I telegraph to him.

He's not that much older—we're not, any of us. Least of all me. And he may refuse to act his age, but there are still some lines he won't cross.

It's why I trust him.

Lauren's scowl at Rae deepens. I slug back more of my caffeine. And an idea hits me.

"Hey," I say to Pan, nodding towards the outside. "Is that a kid messing with your bike out there?"

He slumps. "Aw, what the fuck—"

There is no kid, but Pan's territorial enough about his baby to go check anyway, and it'll buy me a minute or two. He jogs out, and I turn back to the counter. Lean on it a little. Don't make eye contact per se but make sure they know I'm giving them my full attention.

They're short, these girls. Petite, as Gram would say. I'm not. That might be the easiest part about being a guy, the part that comes most naturally for me: being nearly six feet, and that's before you add boots.

That, and making dick jokes.

Behind the counter, the greasy rollers are click-click-clicking under their heat lamps, slow-spinning corn dogs.

"Can I get one of those?" I nod.

"Huh?" Lauren blinks. "Oh. Sure." She goes for the tongs. Rae, meanwhile, is craning her neck after Pan. I make a show of following suit, then looking right at her.

"Here's the thing," I make my voice warm and low, older-brother style. "My boy Pan, out there?"

"What?" Rae looks startled. "Oh, um—"

"You want a mini?" Lauren interrupts, from the corn dog machine. "Or a regular?"

"Both," I answer. The bro-country song fades into something 80s-ish, with saxophones. I look back at Rae. "Anyways, he's, uh..." I smirk. "How do I put this?"

Lauren returns with my corn dogs, and I lift them out of their paper boat. To demonstrate.

"You know." I let the full-size dog drop a little so only the teeny one remains upright. "Mini."

Rae's eyes widen. "Nuh-uh," she says, doing a slow shake of her head. But she's smiling.

"Yeah huh," I say. "Like, so much so that it's weird, you know?"

"Oh my *God*," Rae looks at Lauren and they dissolve

I've turned it into a literal dick-measuring contest.

"Don't tell him I told you," I hurry on. "All I'm saying is, maybe go find some nice boys your own age to take you out for a milkshake."

"False alarm," Pan says, striding back in. "Just a..." Seeing the three of us, he stops in his tracks. Frowns. "What are *you* all talking about?"

"Nothing," I say.

Rae and Lauren burst into another round of giggles.

"What?" Pan's smiling, head cocked.

"Nothing," I repeat. Ever so innocent, leaning against the counter. "Just told them about your little... condition."

"My...?"

"Emphasis on *little*," Lauren squeaks, then collapses into laughter again.

Realization dawns. Pan scowls. But he's smiling too. "You bastard. You—"

"Don't worry about it." I'm smiling now, too, because he's smiling, and hold out my hand with an offer to share. "Corn dog?"

Pan responds by grabbing me by the shoulder and steers me towards the exit. "Ladies, excuse us."

"We work 'til close Friday and Saturday," Lauren calls. "Maybe stop by again?"

"Maybe." Pan yells back, with a wink. "Never say never."

Their giddy little shrieks echo with the chime of the entrance as he shoves me the rest of the way out the door.

I stumble, but I'm laughing.

Because mission accomplished. Everyone goes home happy.

Outside, the others are waiting, Fox and Kit leaning idly while Blue's already on his bike, ready to go. The air feels hotter and dryer now, the late afternoon sun baking all of London Valley, and we've got at least another half-hour ride to Krys's.

"Finally." Fox sighs and rolls his mask down his head. "You guys are like girls in the freakin' bathroom."

"Sexist." Kit revs at him.

"You're sexist." Fox revs back, helmet on.

"You got her number?" Blue. Sounding skeptical.

"Yeah," I cut in for Pan. "Seventeen."

Blue barks out a laugh. Fox chuckles, too, and Kit just shakes his head.

Pan swings a leg over his bike, revs it to life, and skids past me *just* close enough to spit a little gravel on my leg.

"Fuck you very much, *Tink*." But he's laughing.

"Thanks for keeping you out of prison, more like." Blue. "Don't be a dipshit."

"Can't help it."

"What happened to don't ask, don't tell?" Fox wonders.

"That's not what that means." Kit sighs.

"Officially bored now. Bye!" Another rev and Pan's rocketing off into the road, barely missing an SUV that leans loudly on the horn.

"Motherfucker," I whisper under my breath. "You got a death wish?" I add, into the mic. I'm ready: helmet snug, jacket zipped, clutch in.

"Pssh." Pan's voice rings in my ear through the mic as I accelerate after him, Blue, Fox, and Kit trailing. "I'm too young to die."

Someone snorts. Kit. "Yeah, okay. What's that saying? Die young, leave a good-looking corpse?"

"Damn." Fox. Tearing up the road to my left, leaning back a little in his seat. "They say that?"

"Only if you're good-looking in the first place." Blue again. "Rules him out."

"Hey!" Pan cries. "I'm pretty. Tink, back me up."

I speed up, skating lane to lane, eating up pavement. Heart racing along with the engine.

"Beautiful," I deadpan. "Stunning."

Pan laughs. "*Thank you.*"

I catch up to Pan. Hang right at his side. Wind whipping over me, blasting the leather surface of my chest, roaring in my ears.

It's all for show, the shit-giving. Even from me.

No sooner do I catch up than Pan zips ahead. Teasing me, baiting me to follow.

I do. Like I always do. The bike hums underneath me, and I try to tune into that instead. It's a good bike, nothing fancy—Kawasaki Ninja, bright green, couple of scratches but and fits me just fine at all of my 5' 11" in boots. Three or four previous owners, according to Fox when he handed it over to me, but *she purrs like a kitten*.

And I do like that. The sound, the speed. How it spins the world away from you.

You ever want to fly, Bella?

I shake the memory away and decel slightly as we knife off the exit to the Hills, the sun glaring directly into my visor.

Those days are long gone.

I ride with the Lost Boys now.

Bella

A pixie cut.

That's what the nurse just called it. The nurse, with her long, long ponytail.

Slowly, tentatively, I run a hand over my head. Over what feels like my *scalp*.

I'd cry if it didn't hurt so much just to breathe.

"I always wished I could pull off short hair," she blathers on. "But you've got the bone structure for a pixie."

A pixie. The name doesn't even make sense. Pixies, fairies, whatever—they never actually have short hair. I think of all the princess stuff in my bedroom back at Gram's, the Barbies and dollar-store picture books. Long hair, always.

And this isn't a pixie cut, anyway. A pixie cut gets done in a beauty parlor. Not the back of an ambulance.

I find my voice. "Can I go yet?"

The emergency department at London Valley Memorial smells like barf and bleach. The lights make

everything look green and the curtains they have between beds don't give anyone any privacy.

Not that I've had any privacy for a while.

The nurse pretends not to hear me. Or maybe she actually doesn't. It's definitely loud enough in here.

"Five-eleven." She blinks at my chart and does a low whistle. "God, I'd *love* to be that tall."

She pauses. Like I'm supposed to congratulate her on being jealous of me. For something I have no control over.

"And you're so *skinny*, too!"

I feel like nurses aren't supposed to say that. But this is a shitty hospital and she's probably a shitty nurse.

"You could model, you know."

That.

Icepick. Stomach.

I can't say anything, I can't react, I can't cry because I can't even get enough air.

So I just ball up the blanket harder in my fist. Keep staring at the ceiling. At the ugly green light. Like it's the morning star.

"Okay, then." The nurse mutters it in a way that I'm not sure I'm supposed to hear. "Well, I am sorry about the wait." She doesn't sound sorry. "The physician will be with you as soon as possible, but I should warn you, we are *very* busy tonight."

She doesn't need to warn me. I saw the waiting room. I can hear all the stretchers banging in down the hall.

“Any new or increased pain since we checked you in?”

I shake my head.

“Okay. If you feel sharp pain or feel like you’re losing consciousness—”

“Can I at least take this off?” I don’t even know what it’s called. I just know I can barely breathe.

She smiles. Like I’m stupid for not knowing what the beige plastic-and-velcro thing smashing down my chest is called. “The support binder,” she says. “The physician will go over all of that when he arrives.”

When he arrives.

He.

“Okay, but...” My voice sounds craggy. I swallow. “Can you, like, ballpark it?”

“Unfortunately, I’m not able to speculate about treatment, diagnosis, or recovery times.” She sounds all smug about it. I bet she was a mean girl in high school. “You did sustain some severe injuries to the ribs and sternum and for the time being it’s very important that the fractures remain stabilized.”

She’s got on pink scrubs. A pink headband. That long, long ponytail.

“If you want, you can ask the physician when he —”

Never fucking mind. I close my eyes and sink into the pillow. I’m trying to tune things out, when—

“Someone called for victim’s advocate?” The charge nurse, the one that barks everything she says. “LVPD actually sent someone for once.”

I open my eyes again.

No answer. Then the charge nurse again.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you, honey. It's Friday fucking night in the Valley and this is the emergency department. Everyone here's a victim of something. You got a name, or anything?"

You bitch. You murdering bitch.

You fucking killed him.

I am gonna drag your skinny ass in on murder charges. Make no mistake, I am going to get the fucking cops in here and—

Headrush when I stand up. I grab my sweatshirt from the chair. There's enough people walking back and forth that I make it to the end of the hall.

"Bella?"

Nurse Chelsea. I think fast. "Ladies' room?"

She relaxes a little. I'm not here to bother her. "Around the corner."

She points. I walk.

I'm not going to the ladies' room. I don't turn the corner at all, but she doesn't notice or doesn't care. Instead I keep going straight, straight on to the waiting room, to the sliding glass doors, to the outside.

The parking lot's dark. London Valley never gets cold, not really, but when the sun goes down there's a chill in the air, like the blue of the sky is freezing downward to earth.

I look up. Look up and take as deep a breath as I can under this stupid binder.

There's stars out.

Bella

Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight...
The nursery rhyme goes off in my head, automatic.
Stupid.
Grow up, Bella, I tell myself. Grow the fuck up.
And then I run.

Tink

Ten months later

“Suck my diiiiiiiick!”

The voice trails back to me from the bike ahead as it whips between cars down the 303. I grimace, rev, and follow.

Pan’s such an asshole.

“Oh, *very* mature,” someone mutters into the mic. Kit, I think, but maybe Fox—I suck at telling them apart by voice. Doesn’t matter. I say nothing, just focus on gunning it down the asphalt and not getting blinded by the late-afternoon sun.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” crackles a reply. Pan. Wherever he went ahead of us, fastest as ever.

“Yeah, and you’re one to fucking talk, Fox.” *That’s* Kit. I skim past a pickup and take over the lane. The dusty green expanse of the valley stretches hot and dry to my right as I lean into the curve.

“Aw, I’m plenty mature.” Fox. “Someone back me up.”

“No.” That’s Blue.

“I see that and raise you a *hell* no.” Pan.

Fox sighs. “Tink?”

The glare’s torching me in the eyes and I’m sweating under my road jacket besides. I don’t really care, though.

I’m happy.

I rev the throttle. “I’m with Pan.”

Another sigh. “Fuck all of you,” Fox mutters.

“Hard pass.” Pan guns it. “Last one there’s buying!”

Fox is the last one there.

“Sixty-six eighty-three.” The Fill-R-Up girl tosses her ponytail as she rings up the tallboys. The A/C is weak, the air smells like taquitos and sounds like bro-country, and I’ve got my hands in my pockets, studying a rack of air fresheners.

“Aw, for real?” Fox grumbles as he digs around in his wallet. “Shit. I’m short.” He looks up, twisting his head around for his twin, but Kit’s still outside, filling up. “Uh, hang on a sec.”

The Fill-R-Up girl—her nametag says *Rae*—doesn’t answer, isn’t even listening, because Pan’s leaning over the counter. Looking at her.

And suddenly neither Rae nor the girl restocking cigarettes behind her seem to be able to remember what they’re doing.

I continue minding my own business, but glance up at the girls: their cut-crease eyes, their heatless curls, their nail polish. All just to work at the freaking Fill-R-Up.

Meanwhile, I rolled out of bed and pulled on the same pants I wore yesterday...and the day before. My hair’s messed up from my helmet and my lashes haven’t seen mascara in...well, a long time.

And *I’m* the one who’ll be spending the day with four biker boys in leather and road dust.

It really feels like I’m getting away with something. Which I guess I am.

“So you like working here?” Pan is asking the girls. He grins at them, ruffling his hair with his fingers. Right now it’s fire-engine red, stop-sign red, Crayola-crayon red.

On anyone else but him, it’d look ridiculous.

Rae and Lauren blush.

“It’s okay.” Rae speaks up first, twirling a long ponytail strand around her finger.

“Just okay?” Pan looks surprised.

“You meet a lot of people,” Lauren offers.

“I bet,” Pan says. “Anyone interesting?”

Rae and Lauren look at each other. Giggle.

Because...yeah, I’m sure that the five of us are a welcome change from the truckers and night-shift nurses. Five biker boys sauntering in on a slow, dusty afternoon, all gleaming helmets and black leather. For a girl working for minimum wage in the outskirts of London Valley, that’s the stuff dreams are made of.

If I were in their shoes, I’d do the same thing.

“Sometimes,” Rae says at last. Flirtily.

“Okay.” Fox returns, interrupting, oblivious, a fifty in his hand. “We’re good.” He flashes them his big broad grin, which they clearly don’t mind too much either. Fox has a smile that could sell toothpaste and a body that could sell...I don’t know, protein powder, or something. Whatever makes you big and strong like that.

But even for all that, he’s not the big get here, and he knows it. Doesn’t mind it.

Everybody loves Pan.

Everybody.

My heartbeat quickens a little.

"Oh." Rae jolts back to life, blinking. "You want a bag?"

As she busies herself stuffing can after can into the plastic, a single black-gloved hand slams a a pack of jerky on the counter.

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But only partially.

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"Do I know you from somewhere?"

Blue just shrugs.

"I bet you do." Pan grabs the edge of Blue's shirt and yanks it up, flashing his abs for all to see. "Ring a bell?"

"Omigod." Lauren goes white. Rae bugs her eyes out, questioning, and Lauren gives her a definite *I'll tell you later* look in response.

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"More like a pimp." Kit makes a face. "No thanks."

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To do what I'm here to do.

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The girls exchange a look. "Go where?"

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Besides, Pan's in one of his broke phases, and he knows it. If the threat of mob violence won't motivate him, a lack of cash will.

Pan nods. "My man Tink is right. Duty calls." He half-lifts his helmet in a salute. "Been a pleasure, though."

The girls look at each other. A look I know. Each one daring the other to go first.

Lauren seems to win.

"Can..." She sucks in a breath, says her next sentence like it's all one word. "*CanIgetaridesometime?*"

Her eyes are on Pan, but drift up to me, briefly.

I don't give rides. Obviously. But I like knowing I'm under consideration.

Means Tink's doing a good job.

But these girls...

Pan sucks his teeth, fake-deliberating. "Weeeeell..."

"How old are you?" I interrupt. Gruffer than I need to be.

Lauren scowls briefly. Then flushes. "Twenty."

"Bullshit." Rae rolls her eyes. "She's *seventeen*. Same as me." She smiles. "But my birthday's in four months."

Pan catches my eyes, gives me the tiniest wince.

Told you, I telegraph to him.

He's not that much older—we're not, any of us. Least of all me. And he may refuse to act his age, but there are still some lines he won't cross.

It's why I trust him.

Lauren's scowl at Rae deepens. I slug back more of my caffeine. And an idea hits me.

"Hey," I say to Pan, nodding towards the outside. "Is that a kid messing with your bike out there?"

He slumps. "Aw, what the fuck—"

There is no kid, but Pan's territorial enough about his baby to go check anyway, and it'll buy me a minute or two. He jogs out, and I turn back to the counter. Lean on it a little. Don't make eye contact per se but make sure they know I'm giving them my full attention.

They're short, these girls. Petite, as Gram would say. I'm not. That might be the easiest part about being a guy, the part that comes most naturally for me: being nearly six feet, and that's before you add boots.

That, and making dick jokes.

Behind the counter, the greasy rollers are click-click-clicking under their heat lamps, slow-spinning corn dogs.

"Can I get one of those?" I nod.

"Huh?" Lauren blinks. "Oh. Sure." She goes for the tongs. Rae, meanwhile, is craning her neck after Pan. I make a show of following suit, then looking right at her.

"Here's the thing," I make my voice warm and low, older-brother style. "My boy Pan, out there?"

"What?" Rae looks startled. "Oh, um—"

"You want a mini?" Lauren interrupts, from the corn dog machine. "Or a regular?"

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Lauren returns with my corn dogs, and I lift them out of their paper boat. To demonstrate.

"You know." I let the full-size dog drop a little so only the teeny one remains upright. "Mini."

Rae's eyes widen. "Nuh-uh," she says, doing a slow shake of her head. But she's smiling.

"Yeah huh," I say. "Like, so much so that it's weird, you know?"

"Oh my *God*," Rae looks at Lauren and they dissolve

I've turned it into a literal dick-measuring contest.

"Don't tell him I told you," I hurry on. "All I'm saying is, maybe go find some nice boys your own age to take you out for a milkshake."

"False alarm," Pan says, striding back in. "Just a..." Seeing the three of us, he stops in his tracks. Frowns. "What are *you* all talking about?"

"Nothing," I say.

Rae and Lauren burst into another round of giggles.

"What?" Pan's smiling, head cocked.

"Nothing," I repeat. Ever so innocent, leaning against the counter. "Just told them about your little... condition."

"My...?"

"Emphasis on *little*," Lauren squeaks, then collapses into laughter again.

Realization dawns. Pan scowls. But he's smiling too. "You bastard. You—"

"Don't worry about it." I'm smiling now, too, because he's smiling, and hold out my hand with an offer to share. "Corn dog?"

Pan responds by grabbing me by the shoulder and steers me towards the exit. "Ladies, excuse us."

"We work 'til close Friday and Saturday," Lauren calls. "Maybe stop by again?"

"Maybe." Pan yells back, with a wink. "Never say never."

Their giddy little shrieks echo with the chime of the entrance as he shoves me the rest of the way out the door.

I stumble, but I'm laughing.

Because mission accomplished. Everyone goes home happy.

Outside, the others are waiting, Fox and Kit leaning idly while Blue's already on his bike, ready to go. The air feels hotter and dryer now, the late afternoon sun baking all of London Valley, and we've got at least another half-hour ride to Krye's.

"Finally." Fox sighs and rolls his mask down his head. "You guys are like girls in the freakin' bathroom."

"Sexist." Kit revs at him.

"You're sexist." Fox revs back, helmet on.

"You got her number?" Blue. Sounding skeptical.

"Yeah," I cut in for Pan. "Seventeen."

Blue barks out a laugh. Fox chuckles, too, and Kit just shakes his head.

Pan swings a leg over his bike, revs it to life, and skids past me *just* close enough to spit a little gravel on my leg.

"Fuck you very much, *Tink*." But he's laughing.

"Thanks for keeping you out of prison, more like." Blue. "Don't be a dipshit."

"Can't help it."

"What happened to don't ask, don't tell?" Fox wonders.

"That's not what that means." Kit sighs.

"Officially bored now. Bye!" Another rev and Pan's rocketing off into the road, barely missing an SUV that leans loudly on the horn.

"Motherfucker," I whisper under my breath. "You got a death wish?" I add, into the mic. I'm ready: helmet snug, jacket zipped, clutch in.

"Pssh." Pan's voice rings in my ear through the mic as I accelerate after him, Blue, Fox, and Kit trailing. "I'm too young to die."

Someone snorts. Kit. "Yeah, okay. What's that saying? Die young, leave a good-looking corpse?"

"Damn." Fox. Tearing up the road to my left, leaning back a little in his seat. "They say that?"

"Only if you're good-looking in the first place." Blue again. "Rules him out."

"Hey!" Pan cries. "I'm pretty. Tink, back me up."

I speed up, skating lane to lane, eating up pavement. Heart racing along with the engine.

"Beautiful," I deadpan. "Stunning."

Pan laughs. "*Thank you.*"

I catch up to Pan. Hang right at his side. Wind whipping over me, blasting the leather surface of my chest, roaring in my ears.

It's all for show, the shit-giving. Even from me.

No sooner do I catch up than Pan zips ahead. Teasing me, baiting me to follow.

I do. Like I always do. The bike hums underneath me, and I try to tune into that instead. It's a good bike, nothing fancy—Kawasaki Ninja, bright green, couple of scratches but and fits me just fine at all of my 5' 11" in boots. Three or four previous owners, according to Fox when he handed it over to me, but *she purrs like a kitten*.

And I do like that. The sound, the speed. How it spins the world away from you.

You ever want to fly, Bella?

I shake the memory away and decel slightly as we knife off the exit to the Hills, the sun glaring directly into my visor.

Those days are long gone.

I ride with the Lost Boys now.

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