

I was lying in bed staring at the ceiling. I have to get out of here, I thought to myself. I turned to Lena, who was lying next to me. "I have to get out of here," I repeated, this time out loud.

"I know how you feel," she said, turning to face me. The moonlight coming through my window reflected off of her eyes, making them shine like jewels. "I just...it's not even about wanting to go somewhere, it's about needing to leave," she said, as if reading my mind.

"We could always go to The Warehouse," I said, referring to the deserted storage building I liked to go to. It was my favorite place in the world. I had discovered it once when I got lost on my way to an interview and just spent hours exploring its hallways and rooms. Needless to say, I did not get the job. I've visited it hundreds of times since. Lena had only been maybe once or twice.

"I don't know, Rae, I've never been there this late." She gestured to the clock on my bedside table. It was three thirty in the morning.

"I haven't either, but it's beautiful outside. You've got to live a little!" I said jokingly. It *was* beautiful outside. It was the perfect kind of weather that was warm enough that all you needed was a light jacket but cold enough that the wind still felt cool blowing against your skin. Lena laughed, a little too loud, like she always does. She covered her mouth to stifle the sound.

"Quiet!" I whisper yelled. "You'll wake my parents."

"I know, sorry. Okay, I'll go. But you have to promise we'll be back by six," she said.

"Fine fine, whatever," I said dismissively.

"No, really Rae, promise me we'll be back by six," she said, looking all-serious and like her mother.

"Okay, I promise. Can we go now?" I asked, ever anxious to get on to the next adventure.

We got into my beat up red pickup truck, and drove off in the direction of The Warehouse, blessedly unnoticed by my parents. When we finally got there, it looked as if it were in even worse shape than the last time I'd seen it.

Shadows danced off the broken windows, the smell of rotting wood ever present. "Let's go in," I said to Lena. I ran to the lowest window, the glass cracked and mostly missing. I climbed through and then helped Lena get in.

I have to admit, as much as I loved it there, it *was* a lot scarier at four in the morning than four in the afternoon. The cracked windows made shadows everywhere. It looked as if spirits were dancing on the walls around us.

For the first five or ten minutes, Lena just looked around in awe. The place wasn't exactly a palace, but there was certainly something magical about it.

We walked around for a while, just checking it out. After about fifteen minutes, I noticed a ladder propped against the wall opposite me. "Hey, Lena, look over there," I said pointing to blue painted ladder.

"Let's go check it out," she said, running to see where it led.

I followed her. The ladder was tall, and the paint was cracked and peeling. The metal was rusted and it looked as if it couldn't hold the weight of a twig.

"C'mon, we have to see where it goes," Lena said, jumping up onto the ladder. Always so concerned for her safety, I thought jokingly.

After a few seconds she called down to me. "Rae, oh my god Rae. Come up here. You have to check this out."

"What's up there?" I asked, looking up at her.

"I-I-you have to come see it for yourself," she said, sounding anxious.

"Well, here goes nothing," I said. "Lena, if I fall and die, I'm blaming you."

"Yeah whatever," she replied, waving her hand as if to discredit whatever it was I had said.

However old and rickety the ladder was, I made it safely to the top. "Okay, I made it up here. What, exactly, is so astoundingly fascinating about this?" I said looking around.

My eyes hadn't totally adjusted to the darkness, so all I could make out were dark silhouettes of whatever it was I was supposed to be seeing. "Just wait for your eyes to adjust," Lena said, with a mixture of excitement and fear written across her face.

My eyes adjusted. There was a rough looking green blanket in the corner of the room, and a grey wool coat lying next to it. Various things were scattered about in the corner. A watch, a blue winter hat, a pair of rain boots, and what looked to me like just a plain wooden box.

"What is it?" I asked, looking to Lena.

"I don't know Rae. It looks like someone is staying here and it looks like they plan to come back," she said, gesturing to the scattered belongings.

"Impossible," I said. "This place has been abandoned for years. Have you seen the shape it's in? No one would come here."

"Maybe that's what the person who was staying here thought," Lena said.

I walked toward the stuff. I leaned down to pick up the wooden box.

"Please don't touch that." I whipped around. That wasn't Lena's voice, and it certainly wasn't mine. We weren't alone in this apparently un-abandoned warehouse.

A small girl with dirty hair and torn jeans stepped out from the shadows. I stifled a scream. “My mother gave it to me.”

“Oh, uh, we’re, uh, we’re really sorry,” Lena said, backing away from her. “We didn’t know anyone else knew about this place. We uh, we’ll just be leaving, then, I guess.” We both quickly turned to leave.

“Wait!” She called after us, stepping further out of the shadows. Her long hair covered most of her face, but her striking green eyes were still clearly visible. She couldn’t have been much older than we were. “I just...I don’t know. I’m kind of...lonely all alone here.”

My first instinct was to leave. Was to get out of there as quickly as I could and never look back, but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. I looked around at her belongings (or lack thereof) and began to imagine what life would be like here. How horrible things must have to be to bring a person to live like this. My heart went out to her.

I took a step toward her. Lena turned to me, looking both confused and anxious. And like she thought I was maybe a little crazy.

“Why are you here?” I asked her, taking another step in her direction.

“That’s kind of a long story,” she said. “Can we just start with names?”

“Yeah...yeah sure. My name is Rae, and this is Lena.” I looked to Lena, and she nodded.

“And what’s your name?” Lena asked taking a step forward to stand next to me.

“I’m Star,” the girl said, blushing ever so slightly. “I know, it’s kind of a bizarre name, but whatever. It’s not like I chose it.”

“I think it’s a wonderful name,” I declared. “How did you find out about this place?” I asked. It was basically in the middle of nowhere. I wasn’t even totally sure how I had found it; let alone how another person could.

“I used to live near here. My house was only about a mile and a half away from here.” She pointed in the direction her house used to be. “You’d be able to see it from here, if it hadn’t burned down back in ‘04,” she said, looking solemn. She had a hard face. Undeniably beautiful, but you could tell she was someone who had been through a lot.

“I’m sorry, did you just say your house burned down in ‘04?” Lena asked. Immediately after she said it, I knew why she had asked. “And it was right over there?”

“Yes, why?” Star asked, looking utterly confused.

“My house did too. Right over there,” Lena said quietly. “It’s me. It’s me Elena.”

Star gasped. “Elena? Is it you? No, no it can’t be. You look so...so different. So much older.”

Lena smiled bashfully. “And you must be Abbey,” Lena said, emotion flowing over her face. “You’re beautiful,” Lena said, tears pooling in her eyes.

“Oh thanks, Elena,” Star said.

“It’s been...nine years. Nine years since I’ve seen you and your paren-,” Lena faltered at the end of the word. All of a sudden, anger flashed across her face.

Star, or Abbey, must have noticed because she took a step back. “I-I’m sorry, Elena.”

“How could you?” Lena said. Slowly, softly. I could tell by the lines in her forehead she was trying to control her anger, but failing. “Sorry won’t bring my brother back. Sorry doesn’t make everything okay! Sorry didn’t cut it then and it sure as hell doesn’t cut it now!” Lena yelled. Her body shook with anger and shook harder with every sob.

“Elena, so many things happened that night. I couldn’t begin to explain it all,” Abbey said, looking guilty.

I was becoming increasingly fascinated with Star’s history. Lena’s too. I had known that Lena’s house had burned down, but I was never told how. I kind of always just assumed it was a tragic accident.

“Can you at least try?” Lena asked quietly, looking apologetic. Just like that. From such intense anger to a frightened little girl in ten seconds. I guess that was Lena in a nutshell, though.

“I can try,” Star said. “Do you mind if we go out on the roof first? Seeing all the stars just blows my mind.”

“That’s fine with me,” I said. Of all the times I’d been to The Warehouse I’d never been on the roof. I loved the idea of finding something new somewhere that seemed so infinitely old.

Lena didn’t move. “Rae, I don’t think I can do this,” she said. I assumed she was talking about going up to the roof. “I can’t know what really happened that night. Right now, all the possible scenarios I think of could be right or wrong. True or fake. Not knowing is a sort of blessing. After this, I won’t have that. I won’t be able to deny it. What if it’s horrible, Rae? What if it wasn’t Star? What if it was someone like...like my mother? Or-or even my father? I could never forgive them. I-.”

“I know, Lena,” I said, cutting her off. “But think of it this way: after tonight, you’ll never have to guess again. It might be horrible, but it will be closure. And horrible closure is better than no closure.”

“You really think so?” Lena asked, looking me in the eyes.

“I do. I think you need this,” I said. Star had already gone up to the roof. “Come on,” I walked in the direction she had left. “Uhhh...Star?” I said, looking around.

“I’m up here!” a voice called from above. I looked up. There was a small hole, probably just big enough for me to fit through, that led to the roof. I could see the hundreds of stars and the big, open, deep blue sky. I just stood there in awe for a while.

“Watcha waitin’ for?” Star asked. “Come up here!” I pulled myself through the hole and helped Lena do the same. Lena looked miserable. I could tell she was dreading whatever it was that was about to happen.

“You can do this,” I said, looking at Lena.

“I will,” Lena said solemnly. It was heroic, in a way. Lena had lived most of her life creating and re-creating that night. What might have happened, what could have happened, but always with the comfort of not really, truly, honestly, knowing. Right now, as far as Lena knew, it really was just a tragic accident.

“Please, just tell me. At this point the only thing worse than knowing is not knowing. I just please tell me,” Lena pleaded. “Just tell me what happened that night.”

“To explain everything, I have to start with telling you about my dad,” Star said, looking almost nervous.

“But didn’t your dad-“ Lena stopped.

“Yeah, my dad left us that night. I haven’t seen him since and there is nothing better he could have done for my family. He was horrible,” Star said. That took me aback a little. Just two seconds ago she seemed like a scared little girl and now she seemed so defiant and angry.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be. Him leaving was the best thing that could’ve happened to me. Well, or my mom leaving. But she didn’t, and that’s why I’m here. That’s the short answer, anyway,” Star said.

“What *was* your dad like?” Lena asked. “I guess now that I think about it I never really saw him much,” Lena said. That surprised me, seeing as they had supposedly been so close growing up.

“He was a very stereotypical business man. He worked nine to five every day at a law firm about an hour from our house. He wore suits, never cried, and rarely smiled. I suppose he loved my mother and me in a way. He loved in the only way a man who wears nothing but suits and never smiles can. I’m not entirely sure he even understood what it really was to love a person,” Star said, looking away from Lena and up to the sky. She didn’t look angry, she just looked as if she might feel bad for him.

I was at a loss for words. What do you say to that? “Were there any good things about him?” I asked.

“He was smartest man I’ve ever known. I truly believe he saw the world in a different light than we do. Perhaps a darker one,” Star said. “He used to always tell me there was no one in the world I could trust. They all run away sometime, which is ironic considering that’s exactly what he did a year and nine days later.” I could see that Star had really loved her father, however much he lacked that feeling for her.

“Why did he leave?” Lena asked. She was always so blunt and abrupt, as if whatever her question was, it was the most important thing in the world.

“I guess too much pressure. He knew that the fire was his fault, at least to a certain degree, and he knew-“

“It was your father?” Lena asked anger rising in her voice.

“I said to an certain degree,” Star replied.

“To what degree?” Lena asked.

“I’m getting there, I promise. Just let me explain everything else,” Star said.

I thought about Star and her father. And what it must have been like to live with a man like that. I was feeling increasingly sorry for Star. Maybe I could find a way to help her.

“Now, since I’ve explained my father, I suppose I should explain my mother as well,” Star said slowly.

“Oh, Mrs. Jackson!” Lena said, sounding thrilled at the idea of knowing someone who was clearly so important to the story. “I remember your mother well. She would always make the most delicious pies whenever it was someone’s birthday in my family. The apple cinnamon was my favorite,” Lena said, looking nostalgic.

Star looked away. “That was the part of my mother that you knew.” Star looked Lena right in the eye. “That was before. Before my father left. Before she blamed herself and then before she blamed me.”

“I-I’m sorry, I didn’t know I just-“

Star cut her off. “I know. There is no reason that you would know that.”

“What happened?” Lena asked. “What could have changed her so much?”

“My father was an alcoholic. When he was home and it was just me and my mother, he would drink nothing but whisky and did nothing but yell,” Star whispered. “And my mother was always on the edge of a breakdown. She put on a good show, but I could tell. Just one more thing and she would break. I guess the night of the fire was the thing that tipped her over the edge,” Star

said, a single tear rolling down her cheek. “My father came home one night. *The* night. He tripped coming in through the doorway, a bottle of vodka in his grasp. He saw my mother cooking dinner. Anger flashed across his face and fear flashed across her’s. I didn’t think there was anything I could do but stare. “Why isn’t dinner ready!?” my father screamed, sounding somewhat deranged.”

I closed my eyes, trying to see the situation as Star must have seen it all those years ago. I looked to the stars again and thought about how Star’s father was out there somewhere. Maybe he was looking at the same stars that I was. The idea thrilled me and terrified me all at the same time.

Star continued. “My mother was cooking pasta on the stove. He advanced toward her, knocking the pot of boiling water off the stove and catching his sleeve on fire in the process. At first, I don’t think he even realized his shirt was burning right away. You know how sometimes it takes awhile for the pain to sink in?” Star asked.

Lena and I both nodded.

“I assume that’s what happened to him. Once he saw the flames lapping at his arms he let out a cry and tried to bat them out on our cloth curtains. They went up in flames in a matter of seconds. My mother screamed for me to get outside as quickly as I could. I blindly ran for the front door, my legs moving beneath me by some greater force. The fire was spreading. Our old wood house turned to ash before my eyes. I saw my father stagger to the front door. He grabbed nothing but the bottle of whiskey sitting on the counter before him. I watched everything from the front lawn. I saw my father stumble toward your house. The closest thing he could find that wasn’t on fire. He tripped coming up the steps, spilling some of the alcohol on your porch. The houses were so close...and...and...” Star faltered.

“Star, I had no idea. It was the driest summer in decades. The whiskey...I should have realized,” Lena said, reaching out to Star.

“I should have done something Lena, I know I could have. It was just...by the time I had completely realized what was happening, it was too late,” Star said.

“You were only six years old. There was nothing you could have done to save my brother. Regardless of what you’d done, he would’ve gone back for my sister. You know he would have,” Lena responded.

“I’m just so sorry, Lena. I never got a chance to say it before, so I’m saying it now. I’m sorry,” Star said to Lena.

“It’s okay. My sister is okay and my brother is remembered. That’s really all you can ask for.”

“Thank you,” Star said.

“Is that when your father left?” I asked. I was even surprised by my voice. It seemed like I hadn’t spoken in hours.

“Yeah. It took about two hours for him to realize what had happened, understand that it was his fault, get in a car, and leave my mother and me to take the blame. My mother packed our few unharmed possessions, and told me to get in the car. I asked her if we were going to find daddy but she just shook her head slowly, and even then I understood that it was not the time to ask questions.

We went to live with various relatives for about a year, until my mother decided there was nowhere for us to go. After that we mostly just drove. My mother would do what she could to make money and we got by, but just barely.

My mother blamed herself at first, and started to drink. Ironic, isn’t it? The one thing she hated most about my father was the thing that she became once he was gone. One night, a particularly bad night, she decided to blame me. I had never been the prettiest, or the smartest, or the most popular. She told me maybe if I could have been more perfect. If I could have been better, somehow, maybe my father would have loved me more and maybe he wouldn’t have left.” Star looked up. I could tell that she was fighting tears. “I just couldn’t take it after that, so I left and came here. Honestly, I doubt my mother even noticed.”

I began thinking about my family, my home, and I realized how lucky I was. My parents loved me and cared for me. Maybe they could love a second daughter too.

“That’s wrong. It may not be my place to say it, but she’s wrong and I know she is. There is nothing you could have done to change him, or make him stay,” Lena blurted.

“Star, would you maybe want to come stay with me? It wouldn’t have to be forever, but it could be,” I said. I started imagining my life with Star. Her voice interrupted my thoughts.

“I can’t Rae, I’m sorry. I’d like to, but this is my life, I made my decision for a reason and I have to deal with any consequences that come with that decision,” Star said.

I looked at my watch, it read 5:45. The idea of getting home on time seemed so trivial after everything, but I knew my parents would be awake soon. “Lena, we should probably head home,” I said.

“You’re right,” Lena replied, smiling.

“Come visit me,” Star said as we were getting up to leave.

“We will,” we said in unison, turning to leave The Warehouse.

