

There was a flush in his cheeks as bright as lacquered paint, and he stood as a part of the intersection of William and Liberty. I braced myself, waiting to be spotted amidst the noon traffic by his eyes that were too keen and too willing to find me.

I had recognized the face glinting off the side of a bus- classy as all hell- but in real life there was so much less of him, as though I was reaching out to touch him and only grasping air. He finally crossed the street, eyes to the sidewalk but a grin fresh on his face like he knew something the rest of them wished they could, like there was an identity at his fingertips that could be pulled from that hunched twenty-something at any second.

I didn't expect to get a call. Not from him, and recently, not from anyone. I was working an anonymous job, living in an apartment with cement floors that smelled like freezer burn and stale cologne, stuck in the tight sleeves of a life so black and white that it was like seeing the world through dog's eyes. My phone's main use was its alarm setting. I'd been contacted by one or two old classmates, eager and social and completely psyched to hear that life really was worse when you stayed in your hometown. They loved to hear from me, to lap up the haughtiness of a high school reunion without a group photo. To them I was the smart girl who hadn't done as well as they had. I was nothing but a living, breathing comparison.

But I'd gotten that call, and I hadn't had a relaxed muscle since.

I put my hands in my pockets. He'd seen me. He'd somehow found me in the crowd, found me as easily as a friend whose face you see every day. I considered turning and walking away, leaving him struck and confused on something he'd been so sure of only seconds before. I considered it for too long, longer than the space between us.

"Kinsey." His shoulders were pushed up almost to his ears, cold after the sudden end of the fake summer. His hair was as long as it had always been, brown in the sun and black in the shadow.

"Mckenzie now. But you've changed yours too, huh?"

He lapsed into an uneasy smile, and the guilt there struck me like a punch between the ribs. I thought I'd forgotten what that guilt looked like. I guess when you

remember someone's face, when you really map it, you have to remember even the parts you might not like to. "Not my idea. Show business, right?"

I finally looked him in the eye. He was wearing colored contacts. I missed the muddled brown that used to give him a permanently confused and pleading look; He'd ditched it for a blue that almost made my eyes itch. They'd been stripped of their muddiness to be turned the color of... well, nothing, really. Nothing in nature, at least.

He seemed unsettled by my mute intensity. Like old times.

"Why'd you find me?" I said after an extended beat, leaning against the brick wall of the closest building to get out of the way for a couple of pushy teenagers.

"I'm trying to dig something up." He said with an honest half-shrug. "I don't know what, yet, but you came to mind."

I looked away. I'd never been great at catching up- telling someone they've gotten taller and their hair is different is exhausting. "I'm not sure what I'm doing here, San-" I bit off the end of my word and swallowed it, so off kilter that for a moment it was like my voice had never changed. It sounded higher, buttery, smooth like I'd never swallowed a lick of smoke. The syllable went down uncomfortably, an air bubble in my throat.

"It's okay, that's still my name. It's on all of my taxes."

I forced a smile. "Alright, Sandy." The adjustment took a second, and looking back I think that's where something shifted. Just a little pressure, a fingertip on the delicate plate of a scale. I exhaled. "I usually ignore contact from old friends, even famous ones. You'll excuse me for not asking for your autograph."

"Ouch." He clutched his heart. I could see the entertainer in him that had bloomed under the surface, something I'd never really believed was there until I went to a show at the Michigan Theater and heard Sandy's voice in the man onstage. "Your loss, a signature is probably worth something."

"Nice try, but you're only a stage magician. You're not a household name until you have your own TV show."

He avoided a comeback on the rebound. "I don't buy your bluff." He said, a little startled. He had always maintained the ability to be surprised over nothing. "You

obviously dig my heaps of fame and fortune.” I snorted. The knots in my shoulders had begun to ease up. “Why else would you have responded when I called you?”

I didn’t take his bait. “It’s a weekend. I’m bored. You always seemed to be pretty good at keeping me entertained even when you were just...you know.... You.”

“I’m still me. I haven’t changed my identity.” The heat had left his cheeks and he had a crushed look that was only half play-acting. “You know why I got in touch. I know you do.”

I sighed, lifting my hand to take a drag on a cigarette, then twitching it away when I remembered there was nothing there, and there hadn’t been anything there for six years. That’s what I liked to think, at least. There had been times when the hungry burn in my throat wouldn’t subside, when I actually missed the absolute pointless wrongness and doing something just because I could. But I couldn’t afford to make those decisions anymore.

He noticed. “Did you quit?”

“Yeah.” I muttered, dropping my hand with a little twist of shame somewhere in my gut. “A pretty long time ago. No good for me, you know? Almost slipped up a few times. Mistakes....”

He laughed, finally lowering his shoulders “Some mistakes are worth making twice. You should know that, Kinsey.”

My jaw tightened. I heard that same voice yelling at me from my doorstep, yelling even as I shut the door and pressed against it and shut down. *I made a mistake, Kinsey. I made a wrong choice and I’ll do it again and again every day of my life. But you’re making a wrong choice now and you can’t back out of it. You can’t make it right.*

I pretended not to catch his meaning. “I don’t follow.”

His smile sagged. Apparently I was a better actress than I thought. “Really? How about this, then.” He leaned against the wall beside me. I noticed the proximity, and I cursed myself for noticing. “You’ve seen my show.”

“Unfortunately.”

“Don’t be a smartass, come on.” He whined. “Throw me a bone.”

*Hello Again, 11-12, p. 4*

I shrugged, but didn’t stop him . My fingers hadn’t itched for a cigarette in at least a year, but now I palmed my pocket as if hoping I might have one.

“So you saw my disappearing act.” I didn’t back down as he lowered himself nearly to my height. My throat was smoke-dry. “Nothing ever disappears entirely- whether it’s the urge to smoke a cigarette or a rabbit in a top hat.”

I didn’t want to give in to that dangerous rushing urge, that genuine, dangerous pull. I’d been a kid once, whether or not I wanted to admit it. I’d been a kid, and I’d already fallen for too many magic tricks.

Far too many, and apparently one too few. I took the bait. “Or something mutually unspoken?”

He paused for a beat, eyes simmering with an upstaged pleasure. I could almost see the muddiness, even in the blue. The way he jumped on the challenge so readily would have been endearing if it weren’t so worrying.

Worrying? I was worrying, now. I was back to sitting next to him under the sun, refusing to move and telling him what his problem was. Telling him he worried me. Telling him I could fix him up.

He eventually grinned and rotated on his heel away from me, eyes up to the sky. “I have absolutely *no idea* what you’re talking about.”

“I rest my case.”

“Pretty sure that was *my* case.”

I laughed, a real joyfully painful laugh from somewhere in my stomach. I felt bested, and not by a magician, not by a stage performer, but by a kid smiling too wide and trying just a little too hard. I’d missed it, someone with too much of anything. It was rare. “Shouldn’t you get out of here before someone recognizes you?”

“Absolutely.” He put his hand out. I took it. We finally took a step, and the grip turned easy; our feet took the pavement in proud strides, like the curtain had been raised and someone was cheering for us. The nicotine itch hadn’t gone away, but I didn’t mind so much. I’d taken one forward and two back, but it wasn’t so bad. In fact, it felt a little like being somewhere familiar, somewhere where I could afford to make mistakes twice,

*Hello Again, 11-12, p. 5*

or three times, or as many times as it took until those wrong choices became the right ones.

“You don’t really do the rabbit and top hat trick, do you?”

“Sure. All the great magicians do.”