

Red lights illuminate the room as several vehicles skid to a stop across the street, swallowing all previous darkness in one short span of time, and startling me in the process. The boisterous noise is something that I have always been capable of ignoring, learning to value every extra moment of sleep. The lights, on the other hand, I may never be capable of disregarding.

I allow a heavy sigh to escape my mouth as I tentatively stand, flinching as the old floorboards shift beneath my feet, screeching, as if opposed to my sudden movement. As a result, I find myself frozen in place for several moments, but relax upon realizing that Jenna and Scott, my current foster parents, are yet to come home from dinner.

Having only lived here for a few months, I still find myself cringing when the floors creak, when a mouse scurries across the ground in front of me, or when the neighbor's vociferous voices are heard through the paper-thin walls. I suppose I should be used to it, having never lived in circumstances even moderately superior to these, but for whatever reason, I am yet to adjust. After living in several different foster homes (none of which could be described as desirable) with several different sets of caretakers, it is logical to assume I never will.

As I stand thinking, the phone begins to ring from the next room, causing a boisterous sound that quickly demolishes all thoughts of my past.

A long moment passes before I drag myself from my closet of a bedroom and into the only other room in the house, aside from a small bathroom, glancing at the clock in the process. 2:45 in the morning; they should be home by now. My pace quickens as I reach the counter, placing the cold, plastic telephone against my ear.

"Hello?" My voice cracks; hoarse and tired due to the late hour and lack of sleep I had received.

"Miss Winters?" A man's voice inquires, his tone perfectly detached.

I find myself stiffen at his tone, picking up on the seriousness of whatever he plans on saying. "Umm, yeah... Yes. Yes, that's me. Belle is fine, though."

The man on the other line clears his throat, "Well Miss Winters, my name is Mr. Smith, and it is my remorseful duty to inform you that Mr. and Mrs. Scott Chase were delivered to Georgetown Hospital at approximately 2:02 this morning, having been

victims of a brutal car crash on Poplar Street. Despite the admirable efforts put forth by our most qualified surgeons, neither fatality was avoided. Both Mr. and Mrs. Scotts' time of deaths were announced no more than fifteen minutes previous to this call.

"Seeing as you have only been living with the party for five mere months, no actions were taken to ensure your well being or determine your relocation in case of such a misfortunate accident. At seventeen years of age, you are still considered to be a minor. Due to these circumstances, your fate will be taken into the hands of Pennsylvania state, and we will most certainly do our best to find you a suitable new home.

Please pack whatever belongings you have. I will be arriving at the Chase apartment at approximately 8:30AM tomorrow. It is necessary that you comprehend the situation and put your feeling aside for the time being so that we may deal with—"

I vaguely take notice to the phone's sudden absence as it drops from my hand, hitting the filthy wooden floor with a less than pleasurable bang. I blink once, twice, thrice, the instinctual action quickly becoming all that I am capable of. Mr. Smith is still speaking in the same monotonous tone from the floor, repeatedly calling out my name, but it does not concern me. Not any more, at least.

My mind spins for several long moments as I stand, frozen in place, attempting to grasp the information that has been thrown at me. Jenna and Scott are dead. The only decent foster parents I have ever had are dead; gone; never to return. And tomorrow, *they* are coming to take me away. They are coming to strip me of my dignity and destroy all of my being. Again. They will deliver me to yet another set of foster parents who only volunteered to house me so that I can do their chores, and they can find various ways of making money off of me and my labor. Unless I can do something about it.

"I can't be here tomorrow morning," I whisper the thought aloud, quiet enough that Mr. Smith cannot hear, yet loud enough for the statement to sink in.

With this realization in mind, I tiptoe back into my room and grab a small duffle bag, quickly stuffing what few belongings I own into it. 3:00AM. I drape the black bag over my shoulder, walking out the door and downstairs in record time.

The cold winter air immediately causes goose bumps to raise on the surface of my arms, informing me of what little protection my thin sweatshirt provides from the cold. I shiver as I begin to walk toward the nearest train station, debating where to go from there.

A mere ten minutes into my journey, I suddenly become aware of the rusted heart-shaped locket banging against my neck as I walk, a constant reminder of what could have been. Most days, the small trinket only triggers feelings of grief and depression, however, in this moment, it strikes a slither of hope within me.

I absentmindedly adjust my bag on my shoulder as I reach a tentative hand toward the two pieces of metal, held together by a clasp, exhaling as I pull them apart to reveal a picture, no bigger than a dime. As I look down again, I now see two faces smiling and looking right back up at me with the same blue eyes that are my own; my birth parents. Lisa and Adam Winters, two names I had been told by a kind woman at the orphanage years ago, previous to moving into my second foster home.

“In case you ever need to know,” She had said. “Most of their information is locked up tight, as is nearly everyone’s birth parents. You have to understand that there was a reason they gave you away, and accept that.”

I had nodded, trying, as a little girl no older than six, to grasp this bit of information. They didn’t want me. I vaguely remember breaking down into tears when presented this information, crying as the bits of hope I had held onto for so long were yanked away with such force that despite all odds, it *hurt*.

Sighing, the woman had continued, pulling a sheet of paper out of his pocket, one tiny photograph printed in the top left corner, taking up only an inch or so of an otherwise blank sheet. As I turned it over in my hands, I caught sight an address in New York City, scrawled, by hand, in messy print. “It’s all I was able to find,” She explained, handing it to me. I had grabbed at it, staring until the bottom was soaked with tears that had fallen from my face and rolled down the page.

“Th-thank you,” I had managed to choke up a measly two words before more people came, and before I knew it I was whisked away to another foster home, and then yet another. At some point, I was able to scrape together enough extra change to get

myself a locket, where the picture has stayed, untouched, ever since, and the address, though having faded slightly over time, still remained somewhat legible.

I feel myself stiffen up at the memory, and close the locket before my emotions get the best of me. Lisa and Adam Winters. They had not wanted me seventeen years ago when they gave me away, but seventeen years can change a lot. I have to find them.

Content with this decision, I continue walking until it becomes exceedingly clear that I underestimated the distance from the Scotts' house, or what used to be the Scotts' house, to the train station. Nearly three hours pass before I find it necessary to crash on a park bench, holding the few belongings I have to my chest.

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I pry my eyes open hours later, blinking furiously due to the sun's position high in the sky as it glows, casting incredibly bright rays of sunshine over the entire town.

As I glance down at my watch, I realize that it is nearly ten; over an hour after I was supposed to meet Mr. Smith outside my foster parents' apartment and be escorted back to the orphanage, where my fate would be determined.

Sighing, I stand, only to find myself looking directly at a policeman across the street, holding a page of paper up for me to see. As I squint, I am able to make out the word 'Missing' typed across the top, and then, as his proximity grows, a large picture of... me.

I curse under my breath, grabbing my few belongings from the bench and take off in the opposite direction, sprinting down the street without missing a beat. In the back of my mind, I am vaguely aware of the solid cement beneath my feet, and the barely relevant protection my old, worn sneakers provide from the pressure of my feet repeatedly and desperately slamming upon the ground.

After a good ten minutes of constantly looking over my shoulder, I finally conclude that I have outrun the policeman. Content, I quickly duck into a dark alleyway, grabbing a water bottle from my bag, and a crumpled up map from out of my back pocket. The train should not be far now...

A bell sounds in the distance, and I whirl around, realizing, both from the sound, and from the map, that the train station should be at the very end of the alleyway.

With this realization in mind, I abruptly take off in the opposite direction, sprinting down the narrow path, and catching a train to New York just in time, handing over nearly all the money I have to my name in order to pay.

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After a five-hour ride that was, thankfully, a direct trip into New York, I feel the train skid to a sudden halt as people begin to rush past me in crowds.

That is the first thing that surprises me about this city; the exceptionally large crowd of people filling nearly every otherwise unoccupied space in sight. Having lived my entire life, aside from perhaps the few days or weeks after I was born, in Northern Pennsylvania, I am more than well adjusted to being entirely, or close to, alone.

Sighing, I push this thought aside as I shove through the crowds, holding my bag close to my side in case someone tries to steal it. I do not have much, and I cannot afford to lose my few belongings.

Once outside, I tug at my locket for what must be the millionth time today, undoing the clasp, and pulling out the single photo, along with the address.

“328 East 89th Street,” I whisper to myself, quickly memorizing the few words as I return the picture to its previous location. Now I just have to figure out how to get there.

As I look up, content that the photo and address are safe within my silver locket, I cannot help but notice the outrageous amount of people standing out in the middle of the road with a single arm raised high into the air, as if reaching for something.

“What are they *doing*,” I ask, directing the question toward the man directly to my right, standing still as he types on his cell phone. He does not answer. “Excuse me?” I speak louder now, reaching a tentative hand out to tap his shoulder. “Sir?”

“Umm... Yes, yes, what is it?” He demands, pocketing the black device as he turns to face me. “Well, what do you want? I’ll have you know that I am *not* interested in your little girl scout cookies, or raffle tickets, or anything you are selling, for that matter.”

I narrow my eyes, subconsciously standing taller. “I’m not trying to sell you anything. I was just wondering... *What* are they doing?” I repeat my initial question, motioning toward each person with a hand raised.

“Oh how I despise tourists,” The man mumbles, before speaking directly to me once more. “They’re catching *taxi*’s. You know, cars you pay to drive you wherever you need to go. Much easier than driving, if you ask me; especially in a city like yours truly.”

I nod, doing my best to disregard his first comment. “So how much would one of these *taxi*’s cost?”

“Depends where you’re goin’. They’re not much, though—” His phone buzzes, and the man sighs, quickly saying, “I have to go,” Before he is gone, swallowed by yet another crowd of people.

Taking a deep breath, I walk out onto the road and position myself like the people before me: arm raised high in the air. It takes some time, but eventually, a yellow taxi cab pulls up, and as I open the door, the driver immediately screams, “Where to, darlin’?”

I cringe at his tone, but ensure myself that he can’t hurt me, seeing as there are people *everywhere*. “328 East 89th Street,” I say.

Within fifteen minutes, I hand over my last eight dollars and step out of the car.

“Thank you!” I scream as the cab drives away, and I am forced to turn and walk into the luxuriously extravagant building in front of me, silently praying that, after using up the last of my money, this trip will be worth it, that my parents will, in fact, live here, and that they will want me. *Someone* in this crazy world has to want me, right?

“Can I help you, miss?” The doorman, a tall man with a nametag reading ‘Tim’ pinned to his chest, asks before cringing, most likely because I am standing in what must be a very elite building, dressed in the same old clothes I have been wearing for days.

“Yes.” I say, running a hand through my tangled brown curls in a measly attempt to make myself more presentable. “I am here to see... umm... Mr. and Mrs. Adam Winters,” I pause, realizing that I have no proof that my parents are, in fact, married.

He frowns, “Do you have an appointment with Mr. Winters? Is he expecting you?”
Mister. *Just* Mister. No Misses. “No, but...”

“Miss, I cannot allow you to go upstairs if Mr. Winters is not expecting you.”

“Can you call him to come down, then? It’s *really* important,” I can feel my hands start shaking as I begin to get nervous; desperate, even. “It’s... umm... there was an

accident. His friend... his friend was in an accident,” I blurt, trying to think. “They sent me to tell him. Nobody wanted to leave her side, and they didn’t want me seeing.”

“I see... And does this friend have a name?” Tim asks.

“Of course she has a name. Her name is... Well, her name is *Lisa*,” My mom’s name. The first name I think of is my *mom*’s name. “But don’t tell him that. It’s not something you say over the phone. Just say he needs to come downstairs... *immediately*.”

The doorman still looks unsure, but reaches for the phone regardless, calling the man who very well might be my father... to tell him about a friend who might be dead.

I’m sorry. I’m so incredibly sorry. Please don’t hate me... I had to do something. I have to talk to you. I shut my eyes, silently praying that things will turn out alright.

The elevator dings. Feet bang against the white marble floor. A man is breathing heavily. “What happened? What was the accident?”

I open my eyes stare up at a man in his mid-to-late-thirties whose eyes, hair, and face has a striking resemblance to... mine. He has to be him. He has to be my dad.

I sniff, fighting against the tears that are already escaping my eyes and rolling down my cheeks like a waterfall over rocks, behaving on their own accord.

“Oh god. How bad was it? Did anyone... did anyone *die*?” My dad asks.

I shake my head no, choking on my words slightly, “N-no... The... There was no accident. Nothing happened. No one died. No one is hurt. I just...”

He frowns, confused, and the doorman moves to hold my arms behind my back.

“Alright. That’s enough of this game of yours. This is a *very* prestigious apartment building, and I will *not* allow you to bother our residents for the purpose of your *pathetic* amusement,” Tim snaps, dragging me across the lobby and toward the door.

“Wait!” I return my focus to Adam, my eyes filling with desperation. “You had a daughter. Seventeen years ago, on August 2nd, you and a woman named Lisa had a daughter.”

Tim continues tugging at my arms, pulling me away from my dad. “My god, girl. How much more can you lie? I think Mr. Winters here would know if—”

“Wait,” Adam suddenly speaks, cutting Tim off. “Let her speak.”

It's him. I know it. It *has* to be *him*. I yank my arms away from Tim and run forward, out of his reach, as I remove my locket, handing it to Adam. "Open it."

He obeys, his mouth dropping wide open as he catches sight of what's inside. One word escapes his mouth. "Belle."

I nod, all I find myself capable of managing, seeing as the tears I had been struggling to hold back are now rolling freely down my face in erratic paths.

"It's really you..." He exclaims, pulling me into a hug as he begins to explain, "We... We were young; only eighteen and not nearly ready for a kid of our own. We were in love, though, and we wanted you; perhaps her more than me. Lisa was *so* optimistic; always speaking of the future like it was some wonderful fairytale. Like nothing could ever go wrong... but it did. She died in the hospital giving birth to you. Belle was the name she picked... it means 'beautiful'. God, you were *so* beautiful. I should have been happy to have you. I should have been content that at least *you* survived, but... I wasn't. Not for a very long time. I couldn't bear to even look at you; you reminded me so much of Lisa... So I put you up for adoption. You must have been four or five when I finally realized my mistake, but I couldn't find you. I really shouldn't have given up. I should have kept looking. If I had known you'd come looking; that something was wrong; that you weren't happy... Belle, I am *so* sorry."

I swallow, looking up at the man I have known about my entire life, but am just getting the chance to really meet. "It's okay," I say, and as those two words escape my mouth, I realize it really is. No one can know everything. No one can control what happened, or what is going to happen, in his or her life. If we could, then life would be a monotonous cycle of expected events. The obscurities of life are what make living interesting; you never know what the world might have in store for you; like meeting your birth father, or learning about a death. Life is essentially a labyrinth, and it is up to each person to determine a new path to embark on each day.