

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Honors Theses

Honors College (Sally McDonnell Barksdale
Honors College)

Spring 4-16-2021

20 Things

Reann Parker

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#), [Fiction Commons](#), [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Parker, Reann, "20 Things" (2021). *Honors Theses*. 1665.
https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis/1665

This Undergraduate Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College (Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College) at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

20 THINGS

by
Reann Parker

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.
Oxford, Mississippi
April 2021

Approved by

Advisor: Dr. Rosemary Oliphant Ingham

Reader: Dr. Joel Amidon

Reader: Dr. Kenya Bledsoe

© 2021 Reann Parker
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT
REANN PARKER: *20 Things*
(Under the direction of Dr. Rosemary Oliphant-Ingham)

20 Things is a short young adult novel that explores a variety of topics and themes, from mental health, recovery, and self discovery to race, love, and friendship. Beginning with a high school girl named Halle waking up in a hospital after a suicide attempt, the novel is a coming of age story about the help Halle receives and what she goes through in trying to find reasons to keep living. The novel is divided into ten chapters: “Waking Up,” “Going Home,” “Arriving,” “Being Honest,” “Keeping the Faith,” “Soul Searching,” “Willingness,” “Maintaining,” “Checking In,” and “Living.” Each chapter represents the stage of life Halle is in and her experiences through that stage of her healing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Dr. Oi, thank you for being so willing to be my advisor and encouraging me to take on this big task even though I felt behind schedule. Thank you for believing in my ability to write and for affirming me throughout each stage of this process. Thank you for your guidance and optimism.

To my love, thank you for being a constant source of peace and safety for my heart to rest whenever I feel overwhelmed and weary. Thank you for your presence. Your ever-present love inspires me more than you could ever know.

To my sister, Raina, thank you for giving me tough love and not allowing me to quit. Your reminder that I didn't come this far just to give up was the push I needed to see this through. I wouldn't have made it here without you.

To my parents, thank you for always supporting my independence and free spirit. Thank you for knowing me enough, seeing me enough, loving me enough, to notice my silent cries for help and for sending words of encouragement right on time.

To my friends, thank you for putting up with all of my pity parties whenever I didn't want to write anymore, and then telling me to suck it up and keep going. Thank you for checking on me, holding space for me, and for always being interested in my writing.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	vi
CHAPTER ONE: Waking Up.....	1
CHAPTER TWO: Going Home.....	11
CHAPTER THREE: Arriving.....	20
CHAPTER FOUR: Being Honest.....	29
CHAPTER FIVE: Keeping the Faith.....	50
CHAPTER SIX: Soul Searching.....	70
CHAPTER SEVEN: Willingness.....	92
CHAPTER EIGHT: Maintaining.....	106
CHAPTER NINE: Checking In.....	123
CHAPTER TEN: Living.....	139
BIBLIOGRAPHY:	150

INTRODUCTION

I originally got the idea for this short novel when I was in a young adult literature class my senior year of college. The goal of the class was to expose future educators to the novels that are being written right now for our students. While reading each of the books, I saw common themes present among them such as identity, race, love, friendship, drugs and alcohol, and others that all encapsulate the highs and lows of coming of age. It was while doing all of this reading that I noticed very little attention was given to the mental health of young adults.

As someone that has personally struggled with anxiety and depression, I believe it is important for young adult novels to cover a topic that so widely impacts today's youth. Mental health has remained a taboo topic that has caused many people to not speak up about their struggles and to suffer in silence. Teenagers especially can feel alone in their battles when no one is talking about what is really going on.

The process of writing this novel was challenging and forced me to do my own introspection. In order to write about a young girl struggling with her mental health, I tapped into some of my own anxious thoughts in order to believably depict certain thought processes and experiences. There would be times that I wrote for hours for days in a row, and then there would be times that I couldn't open the document for weeks. Through each stage, I had to constantly remind myself to be gentle and patient with myself, especially since this entire story is about protecting your mental health.

While writing, it was hard for me to share what I had written with others. At times, it felt as if I was handing in the personal pages of my diary for others to read. Though Halle is her own

person with her own unique experiences, a lot of her perspective and thoughts are my own. In a way, writing this novel was therapeutic. When writing about Halle taking steps to be in control of her own mental health, it encouraged me to work to do the same.

I have personally never been through any form of mental health program, but when I was thinking about my own healing journey, it reminded me of the approach taken in the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Each step represents critical moments involved in taking accountability and working towards self growth. I adapted the 12 Steps to focus on what I thought is important for someone working on their mental health such as honesty, faith, soul searching, being willing to change, and maintaining what has been learned. I then used those to form the program Halle and the other retreat attendees go through in the novel.

A lot of the content that Halle is exposed to during her time at the Finding Light Retreat was inspired by what I learned while obtaining my yoga teacher certification. It was during my yoga teacher training that I was compelled to learn all the ins and outs of myself, and I learned what it feels like to fall apart so that I could love myself back together.

As you read this story, I want you to take a moment to step back and evaluate your own life. To look at how you view yourself, how you talk to yourself, and what you let surround you. Understand that healing isn't linear and you may have to start over a few times. The next time a loved one tells you that they are going through something, really listen to them, support them, and hold space for them in any way you can.

Waking up

I don't really know how I ended up where I am today. Well, actually that's not true. I know exactly why I'm laying on a firm bed with tubes down my throat. I expected to wake up on the other side of whatever happens when you die but I guess I didn't do it right. Figures. I never do anything right, so I don't know why I'm surprised that I couldn't successfully overdose either.

I am just now getting my senses back, and I slowly start to open my eyes to see the room around me. It looks pretty plain and depressing in this room. I've always hated hospitals because they remind me of sickness and death, but I guess that's why I'm here. The walls are a pale white, the floors are tile with colorful specks in them which is honestly pretty tacky, and the only pieces of furniture are a chair and a couch by the window overlooking the parking lot. I hear a beeping sound so I turn my head to look at the monitor. The beeping represents my slow but steady beating heart. Damn. I really am still here.

I really want to get out of the bed and out of this hospital but considering my current situation, if I try to leave I'll probably be committed to the nearest institution. Not that there's anything wrong with institutions. I think mental hospitals can be very helpful for people in need,

but I'm not one of them. I don't belong here. I've never been the type to talk about my feelings, and I'm definitely not going to start now. Not after this. If anyone asks, and I know they will, I'll say I accidentally took too many painkillers to help relieve the headache that I got from studying for finals and nothing more. I didn't really try to kill myself. I'm perfectly fine.

I'm watching the cartoon playing quietly on the television when I hear voices outside of my hospital room that I recognize to be my mother and who I am assuming is the nurse or the doctor. I try to ignore them and just focus on mindlessly watching the show to keep me from thinking too much. One of my favorite episodes of *SpongeBob* is playing; the one where SpongeBob and Patrick are trying to sell chocolate bars around the city. Watching *SpongeBob* reminds me of my childhood and the joy of waking up early on a Saturday to the smell of my dad cooking waffles, and then watching cartoons with my younger brother all morning. That was all before life got hard and everything was so much simpler. I have successfully been ignoring the conversation in the hallway until I hear a few words uttered from the doctor that immediately grab my attention.

Recovery. Rehab. Therapy.

I notice my breath shallowing, and I clench my chest. I think I'm about to have an anxiety attack. I can't go to rehab! Everyone in school will find out, and I will always be known as "the girl that tried to kill herself." I really can't handle going into my senior year of high school with that kind of baggage. My heartbeat continues to accelerate, and I can hear the monitor beeping faster and louder. I start to do the blast anxiety countdown that my friend Maya taught me to help me control my breathing.

I look around the room and point out five things I can see. I see the TV, the couch, the chair, the monitor, and a cup of half-eaten jello on the side table. Check. Now I point out four things I can physically feel. I touch the firm mattress, the soft but thin sheet covering me, the hospital gown I'm wearing, and my soft, curly hair. Check. Next is three things that I can hear. I hear SpongeBob's laughter, honking caused by the afternoon traffic, and the monitor that reminds me that I'm still alive. Check. Now for two things that I can smell. I smell that scent that I can only describe as "hospital" and the tea tree oil from my hair. Check. Lastly, one thing I can taste. Jello.

My heart rate slowly returns to a normal pace and I let out a long sigh. That exercise always helps to relieve my anxiety even if it is just for a few moments. Maya says that the exercise works because it helps you to feel grounded and in control of your surroundings. I have to do that exercise at least once a day, but there have been days that I had to do it over ten times. I would ask Maya if there would ever be a time that I don't have to do that exercise so often but she moved to Colorado last year and we don't talk as much as we used to. She was my absolute best friend, and we did literally everything together until her mom's new job forced them to move, leaving me behind.

I return to mindlessly watching the TV when the door slowly cracks open and my mom steps inside. She walks in, lies down next to me, and lets out a long, heavy sigh. It's the type of sigh that says, "I've had a long day, my energy is completely gone and all I want to do is curl in a ball and go to sleep." The only time my mother usually sighs like that is after she gets home from work or after my dad calls her to say he'll be working late again.

Once she has laid down comfortably next to me, she says, “Hey, baby. How are you doing?” and shows me a soft smile. “I know you can’t really talk right now but the doctor is about to come in to talk with you and to remove those tubes. I know you might be scared right now but everything is going to be fine.” I look up at her, maybe she does actually know that I haven’t been okay and she’s been paying attention to me all along. “You just had a little accident but I know you didn’t take all of those pills on purpose,” she says.

I look away and focus back on watching *SpongeBob*. My mother begins to softly rub my head like she used to do when I was a kid and she was trying to help me fall asleep at night. I can tell she is trying to look chipper for me but I can see the red swelling in her eyes from crying. She continues to rub my head and stroke my hair, and I close my eyes to fully take in this moment. I haven’t felt my mother touch me in an affectionate way since I got to high school, so that makes at least three years. It’s not like I don’t know that she still loves me and all of that, she just doesn’t show it through physical touch.

I read something once that said you need eight hugs a day or something like that in order to be healthy and happy. I think that was an exaggeration because there is no way that someone can get that many hugs in a day. These days, if I do get a hug, it’s from my dad but he’s gone all day at work and I’m usually asleep by the time he gets home. I wonder if that is part of what is wrong with me. I push that thought away and remind myself that if I’m going to convince other people it was an accident, I need to work on convincing myself of it too.

My mom and I have been watching *SpongeBob* together for about twenty minutes when the doctor finally comes in. I don’t know what I expected him to look like but this definitely wasn’t what I had in mind. He is a short white man that is slightly, but noticeably, overweight

and wearing blue scrubs under a white coat. I wasn't surprised by his skin color, his height, or his clothes but aren't doctors supposed to be in shape? Like, how can you tell someone else how to be healthy if you aren't healthy yourself? I didn't expect him to be super built or anything like that, but I assumed he at least would have been in a healthy weight category.

"Good afternoon Ms. Myers, my name is Doctor Shull. How are you feeling?" he asks.

I don't know how he expects me to talk because I still have these tubes down my throat so I just try to show a smile.

"Your nurse is on her way now to help remove your tubes and then we are going to ask you a few questions," he says.

A beautiful young Black woman, probably in her late twenties, with a short afro comes in, tells me her name is Chelsea, and asks me how I'm doing. I'm already tired of people asking me how I'm doing at this point. I'm laying in a hospital bed, how do they think I'm doing?

"I'm going to remove the tube from your mouth now, okay? It won't hurt but it may be a little uncomfortable. Just try to relax and it will all be over in just a second," she says.

She walks over to me and slowly removes the tube from my mouth. I have never felt anything like that, and all I can describe it as is very, very weird. When the tube is completely removed I start to gag and tears start rolling down my face. I hate all of this. The sooner I can get home and return to my normal life, the better.

"We'll start easy. Can you tell me your name?" Doctor Shull asks.

"Halle," I say with a slightly raspy voice.

"Okay, great. Do you know why you are here today?" he asks.

“Um, I had a really bad headache when I was trying to study, so I took one or two aspirin so I could keep studying,” I say. I try to sound as convincing as possible but I know I must sound like I’m reading a script.

The nurse and the doctor give each other a worried look and glance at my mom to see her reaction. She is up and standing beside me at this point, holding my hand, and trying to maintain her soft smile.

“You were brought here after your little brother found you unconscious in your bedroom with four empty pill bottles,” he says.

Doctor Shull walks closer to me and gives me a warmhearted smile that almost immediately makes me want to cry. I quickly remember how Maya told me that if you ever want to keep yourself from crying, all you have to do is touch the roof of your mouth with the tip of your tongue. I touch my tongue to the roof of my mouth and I look down at my hands.

“It was an accident,” I say softly as I twiddle my thumbs.

“We aren’t accusing you of anything. We just want to make sure that you are doing okay,” he says.

“I am doing fine. I really am. I just...it was an accident,” I say.

“I understand. We are just going to sign you up to go on a six-week retreat with a few other kids around your age and a few members of our lovely staff from the counseling department,” he says.

Six-week retreat? Counseling department? I repeat the words over and over in my head. A six-week retreat with the counseling department is obviously code for I am going to rehab for the summer. There is no way I am going to spend the summer with a bunch of people I don’t

know. I have extreme social anxiety. I know that might sound really dramatic, but it's the truth. The thought of going somewhere with complete strangers and having them look at me or me trying to start a conversation with someone makes me sick to my stomach. That is the entire reason I never went to summer camp or any sleepovers with more than five girls as a kid. My social anxiety has gotten better as I've aged, and it hasn't kept me from going to school dances or anything like that, but still, I really hate going anywhere that involves a lot of people looking at me.

I look at my mom who hasn't taken her gaze off of me, and I search her eyes to try to see what she is thinking. There is no way my mom is going to let me be sent off for over half of the summer, especially since I'm supposed to be studying for the SATs to get into college next year. My mom always told me and my little brother that school comes first no matter what and anything else is just extra or unimportant. I look back at the doctor and open my mouth to tell him and the nurse that I don't need to go to the retreat when my mom cuts in and says, "When does she need to have her things packed to go?"

Completely shocked, I look back at my mom and say, "But mom I'm supposed to be studying for the SATs this summer! I can't be gone all summer at some retreat that I don't even need."

"Honey, I know that this is all a misunderstanding and that you didn't intentionally harm yourself, but the fact of the matter is we almost lost you. Your father, little brother and I all love you so much, and the thought of you not being here anymore is unbearable," she says.

Tears slowly fall from my mother's face and I can tell she is starting to drop the mask she put on to hide her true feelings. My mother takes two deep breaths and says,

“You are going to the camp and that is final. If nothing else, you will learn better ways to cope with your stress rather than turning to substances.”

“Camp won’t be as bad as you think, Halle. Just you wait and see. You are going to meet a lot of other kids there and your little brother even gets to come with you,” Doctor Shull says.

“Really, my brother will get to come?” I ask.

“Yes of course! Everyone participating in the retreat gets to bring one family member or close friend with them for emotional support,” he says.

I’ll admit that hearing this made me feel a little less nervous about going to the retreat. At least with Jabari there, I’ll have someone to keep me company and make me laugh. I know Jabari was really excited about playing in basketball tournaments all summer so I hope this doesn’t make him too mad at me. I really hate the idea of him, or really anyone, being mad at me. It makes me anxious. Before Doctor Shull can continue talking about the retreat, there is a soft knock on the door and in walks my younger brother Jabari with my dad.

“Hey there Caterpillar. How are you doing?” my dad says as he walks over to me and kisses my forehead.

“Hey Daddy,” I say as I lean into his kiss. “You know I don’t like when you call me Caterpillar,” I say teasingly. My dad has called me Caterpillar for as long as I can remember. He claims that when I was a baby I would eat until I was so stuffed that I just scooted around on my belly, and I’ve been called Caterpillar ever since.

“You’re looking a little rough sis,” Jabari says jokingly so I softly punch his arm.

“Shut up Jabari! I still look better than you,” I say.

I am so thankful that my little brother always knows how to make me smile even in the worst situations. That's one of the best things about him. We fight a lot and tease each other, but I know he's always got my back. We both laugh, and Jabari bends down to give me a hug. That never happens, and I mean never. The most my brother and I do is our handshake, but this is a nice change and it feels good.

“Now that we are all here we can talk more about the retreat. The retreat is called Finding Light, and it is at the Wall Doxey State Park in Holly Springs, Mississippi. The retreat starts next Monday on May 24th and will end on July 9th. Halle and Jabari will spend about six weeks there with ten other kids around their age. Five of them will have been recommended to attend the retreat and the other five are whoever they asked to come support them. During the retreat, there will be weekly group sessions with the other attendees and our counselors. There will also be individual sessions with the counselors for each attendee. This will happen a few times each week. When you arrive you will get to meet everyone, and you'll be assigned to one of our counselors who will be there to support you throughout the retreat. These counselors will be who you go to when it is time for your individual sessions,” Doctor Shull says.

Sessions. I knew I was going to rehab. This all sounds like I'm going to be sitting in a circle with a bunch of people just as messed up as me singing Kumbaya and trying to pretend everything is sunshine and rainbows. I look over at Jabari and he surprisingly doesn't look like he hates everything about what Doctor Shull is saying. He actually looks really interested and so do my parents.

“We have specifically chosen a location to host the retreat that is very beautiful, serene, and relaxing. There is a beautiful lake for fishing or swimming and trails for nature walks. When I

was walking one of the trails I came across some deer, so hopefully y'all will get to see them too. When you aren't in a session, we will have fun group activities going on that you can participate in if you wish, or you can choose to relax in your cabin. The activities will all be enjoyable, so I hope you choose to participate in them. You will hear more about those when you arrive. At some point during each week there will be a field trip off location, but we won't go anywhere that is over an hour away from the retreat. We have hosted several Finding Light retreats, and at the end of each session, the attendees always say that the retreat was one of the best experiences they have ever had. I'm really excited for the both of you to attend this retreat, and if y'all have any specific questions you can ask Chelsea. She will be attending the retreat as the head nurse, and she is also one of the group activity facilitators," he says.

When Doctor Shull leaves, my parents continue to talk to nurse Chelsea about the retreat to get information about meals, how they will communicate with us, where exactly we will sleep, and stuff like that. You know, things parents want to know when their kid is going somewhere. After my parents finish talking to the nurse, they help me get myself together so we can check out of the hospital. As I'm putting my clothes back on in the bathroom, I take a second to look at myself in the mirror. I see my reflection, but it doesn't look like me anymore. I can barely recognize myself and this person is a stranger. I don't know who I've become.

Chapter 2

Going Home

The drive home from the hospital is quiet. I don't think anyone knows what to say. Honestly, what is there to say? I spend the majority of the ride looking out my window and counting how many yellow cars go by. Every time I see one, I say "bingo" in my head. When I was younger and would get box braids done by my hairdresser, which would only take four hours on a good day, we would play a game and say "bingo" every time we saw a yellow car and "leapfrog" whenever we saw a green car. It has stuck with me ever since.

Jabari is the first to break the silence when he tells a lame knock-knock joke. It is probably one of the worst knock-knock jokes I've ever heard but it gets everyone laughing and it helps to clear some of the awkwardness of the car ride.

"Hey babe, open the glove compartment and hand me the CD in the yellow case. You might have to look around in there a little bit to find it," my mom says to my dad.

My dad rustles through snacks, lotions, old receipts, and other junk in the glove compartment as he tries to look for the CD.

"Dang Monica, you are like a pack rat or something. You've got so much junk in here," he says.

“None of that is junk. It is all essential. If you ever get hungry or decide to moisturize those ashy knees you’ll be thankful for all my ‘junk’ as you call it,” she says.

We all laugh and my dad hands my mom the CD. My mom puts the CD in the player and

“Double Dutch Bus” starts blaring out the stereo.

“You still have our old road trip CD! I used to love listening to this CD on our family vacations as a kid! I can’t believe you kept it all this time,” I say to my mom.

“Of course I kept it!” my mother exclaims. “This CD is a Myers family classic. You and Jabari would fuss and fuss on long car rides until I turned this song on.”

We spend the rest of the ride home jamming to old tunes and laughing. When we get home, I am the first one in the house, and I am greeted by our dog Tucker. As he licks my face I think about how much I would’ve missed all of his affection if I had successfully gone through with my attempt. After being home for about thirty minutes, my mom calls out that dinner is ready and we all eat together as a family for the first time in three years.

The next few days seem to fly by, and it is already time for Jabari and me to start packing for the retreat. We leave tomorrow morning to drive to Holly Springs and I’m starting to feel really anxious about the whole thing. I don’t really know what I am supposed to bring for this sort of thing so I just start with the essentials: clothes, toiletries, and my lion stuffed animal. I know that I’m seventeen and probably shouldn’t need to sleep with stuffed animals, but my grandparents got it for me as a kid and now I can’t sleep without him.

Once I finish packing everything I need, I lay on my bed and stare at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling that my mom helped me put up as a kid. Every time I stare at these stars, I

can't help but think about how I wish I could escape this life and be like the kids in *Peter Pan* going to Neverland; take the second star to the right and go straight on 'till morning.

I'm deep in a daydream when I hear my parents arguing in their bedroom just two doors over. I can barely make out their words but I know they are talking about me.

"It was just an accident!" my mother yells. "Our daughter would never hurt herself on purpose."

"Monica, no one takes four bottles of pills by accident," he says.

"Well, she wasn't trying to kill herself," she says.

"Even if that is true, this was clearly a cry for help. If Jabari hadn't gotten to her in time, we would've lost her," he says.

"We just need to go back to church. We haven't been in a while and I think it would be really good for our family," she says.

"Babe, Halle really needs to see a therapist," he says.

"I don't understand why she wouldn't come to us if she was struggling with something," she says.

"I-I don't know. I really don't. I do know that she needs professional help, and we are going to make sure she gets it," he says.

"Let's just wait until after the retreat, please. We can talk about it more then," she says.

I hear my dad start walking towards my room so I pop up and act like I'm still packing. There is a soft knock on the door and then my dad enters. When he gets in, he sits on the edge of my bed and gazes around my room. He does this a lot so I didn't really think anything of it, and I just continue on with my packing. It is not until I start to hear my father softly sniffing that I look up and stare at him. My father is not a crier. He likes to keep up with that "Black men

shouldn't be soft or show emotions" bullshit that keeps fueling toxic masculinity and makes "angry Black men" stay angry. Seeing him cry is shocking and honestly heartbreaking. I put the sweater I'm holding down and sit next to my father. I place my hands in his and I wait for him to speak. After what seems like an eternity has passed, my father finally speaks.

"You know that I love you right," my father asks.

"Yes, of course, I know that," I say.

"And you know that if you ever need anything that I'm always here for you?" he asks.

"Yes I know that too, Daddy," I say.

"I just don't understand why you did what you did. What's going on? Talk to me," he says.

"It was just an accident. I promise. I really didn't do it on purpose," I say. I've said this so many times that I think I'm getting the hang of sounding convincing. My dad knows me better than the back of his hand though, and I know he can tell that I'm lying.

"If you can look me in my eyes and tell me that it was an accident, then I will believe you," he says.

I turn to look my dad in the eyes, and I wipe a tear off of his cheek. It hurts knowing that I'm the reason he's in pain right now. I wish I could tell him how I've been feeling. I wish I could tell him that sometimes I get so anxious that I feel like I can't breathe. I wish that I could tell him that sometimes I get so sad that I wish I could just die. I wish I could tell him anything. I don't know why but I just can't. So instead, I look my father in the eye to tell him that it was a mistake and that it won't happen again. My father and I hug for a long time after that. As soon as my dad leaves my room, I throw myself onto my bed and cry until I fall asleep.

I had a really hard time sleeping last night. I dreamed the same dream I have every time I'm about to be in a situation that makes me uncomfortable. When I was younger, I watched this one episode of *Barney* that involved all of the characters going camping. In that episode, there is a bear and for some reason, that bear has always scared me even though it is just a man in a mascot bear suit. In the dream, I see the bear, and I am running as fast as I can to get away from it. Even though I try to run really fast, I always seem to be running in slow motion. Eventually, I trip or something and I end up screaming, begging myself to wake up. When I do finally wake up, I'm always sweating and my heart is beating out of my chest. I hate when that happens.

I lay in bed and stare at the stars on my ceiling. I'm really going to miss them while I'm away at this retreat but from what the doctor told me, I should have a great view of the night sky. I roll over to look at the clock on my nightstand and see that it is 7 a.m. We are leaving around 9 a.m. so I should probably be getting up right about now but I don't. Getting out of bed in the morning is always really hard for me. Most days I wake up feeling anxious and today is no different.

After about ten minutes of laying in bed, I finally get up and start getting ready. I'm not really sure what I want to wear but I do know that I want to make a good first impression when I get to the retreat. I riffle through all of the clothes in my closet, and I finally decide on wearing a red tank top with a blue-jean skirt and white Air-Force 1's. To top it all off, I add a gold chain belt and my favorite gold stack necklaces. This outfit says, "I'm cute enough for people to notice but not think that I tried too hard." Just how I like it. Even though I have social anxiety, I still like dressing in a way that people will notice and compliment. I'm a bit of a conundrum, I know.

Once I am done getting ready, I head downstairs to see what the rest of my family is doing. My mom is in the kitchen cooking breakfast and I notice that she is cooking all of Jabari and my favorite foods: biscuits, cheesy eggs, crispy bacon, grits, waffles, and smothered hash browns. My mom hasn't cooked a big breakfast like this since I was in elementary school. Every morning, our family is normally too busy getting ready for school or work to eat a meal this elaborate. We usually just eat a bowl of cereal or a *Poptart* or something like that so smelling all of this yummy food is a shock to my nose and makes my mouth water. I really wish that it didn't take a situation like this to get my family to spend time together again. I don't want to blame anyone for my depression or anxiety but it would've been helpful to have this attention from my family before I tried to kill myself. Or rather, before my *accident*, as I should say.

When my mother sees me, she gives me a hug and asks me to set the table. It takes me a while to find everything I need. The first thing I look for are the placemats and I finally find them in the back of a cabinet that we hardly ever open. They are a little dusty so I smack them together to try to clean them a little. Once I put the placemats on the table, I grab the silverware from the utensil drawer and the plates from another cabinet. I put everything out on the table and by the time I finish my mother tells me that breakfast is almost ready.

"Hey mom, where are Jabari and dad at?" I ask.

"Your brother is outside playing basketball with some of his teammates and your father is on his way home from work," she says.

"Really? Dad had to go into work on a Saturday morning? Is everything alright?" I ask.

"Yeah, everything is fine." My mother lets out a long sigh and focuses on stirring the grits on the stove. "He got a call from an important client so he had to run to the office to meet with them. He

should be back any minute now. Go outside and tell your brother to get washed up for breakfast,” she says.

I go outside and find my brother playing basketball with his friends. I don’t know much about basketball but from what I can see, my brother is surprisingly really good. I watch him make basket after basket. He is definitely the one carrying his team. I hate that I’m going to make him miss playing in all of his basketball tournaments this summer. I talked to him about it once we got home from the hospital and he told me not to worry about it. According to him, this is the perfect opportunity for the rest of his teammates to better their game.

After watching my brother play for about five minutes, I yell for him to go take a shower so we can eat breakfast. Jabari looks at me with a look of surprise and says, “For real? Momma made breakfast?”

I laugh and say, “Yes, for real. She’s in there making all of our favorites. She even pulled out the waffle maker.”

“Damn! She’s really pulling all the stops. She knows how much we love her waffles. Let me make one more shot and then I’ll be right in,” he says.

My brother runs down the court and makes a perfect three-point shot.

As soon as my dad gets home, we all eat breakfast and then start packing the car to leave. I was putting my suitcase in the trunk when Ms. Ronda, our neighbor from across the street, walks over and starts talking to my mother. My parents are constantly telling my brother and me to stay out of grown folks’ business when they are talking to other adults but Ms. Ronda knows all the juicy gossip so I try to listen without being obvious.

“Hey there Monica! Hey Bryce! How are y’all doing? It looks like y’all are going somewhere.

Where are y’all headed,” Ms. Ronda asks.

“We are driving the kids to a re-,” my father begins to speak when my mother abruptly interrupts him and says,

“A, uh, camp. We are taking the kids to camp.”

“Oh really! That’s exciting for y’all. Y’all will get a chance to spend some time together with an empty nest. From what I remember, Halle has never been to a camp before. What made her decide to finally go to one?” she asks.

My mother nervously looks at my father. I can tell that she is scrambling to think of what to say to Ms. Ronda. Even though I’m not supposed to be in the conversation, I walk over and say,

“Since I’m going to college next year, I just wanted to have a chance to get out of the house and practice meeting some new people.”

“Oh, okay honey. I completely understand. My son Jameson did something similar right before he left for college a few years ago. I hope you and your brother have a great time at camp.

Hopefully, y’all will be back in time to make it to the church’s Fourth of July celebration. I’m hosting it at my house this year and I’d love for y’all to attend. We sure have been missing y’all on Sundays. Speaking of church, Monica I need to tell you about what happened between Sister Ruby and Dean Bobby,” she says.

I go back to packing the car while my parents continue talking to Ms. Ronda. I think about asking my mom why she lied to Ms. Ronda about where we are really going but I know the answer. She doesn’t want everyone to know that something is wrong with me. If Ms. Ronda found out Jabari and I were going to a mental health retreat, we’d be the talk of the entire Black

community. Going to a therapist or receiving any type of help mentally is essentially unheard of for Black people. We hear a lot of “rehab is for white people” and “you don’t need to talk to a counselor, you need to talk to God” around here. That’s part of the reason I never talk to anyone about how I feel. They wouldn’t get it.

Ms. Ronda finally goes home after talking to my mom for a solid twenty minutes and we start our over three-hour drive from Jackson, Mississippi to Holly Springs. We’ve only been on the road for about thirty minutes when my reading is interrupted by Jabari’s loud snoring. I swear that boy snores louder than any grown man ever could. I pull out my headphones and play some jazz music so I can enjoy the rest of the ride in peace. I rest my head on the window and peer out to look at the scenery around me. Before I know it, I have fallen asleep and I am snoring just as loud as Jabari. I wake up when I hear my father say, “Look out the window y’all. We are here.”

Chapter 3

Arriving

Wall Doxey State Park is more beautiful than I could have ever imagined. Doctor Shull's description of the park could not even begin to do this view justice. When we arrive, the first thing that I notice is the lake. The water is a beautiful shade of blue that resembles the color of the midday sky. I can definitely see myself spending a lot of time reading by it when I am not in one of the sessions. Alongside the lake, there is a deck that leads to gazebos which I am assuming people use for picnics. Surrounding the lake are hundreds of trees that perfectly shade the nature trails to keep them not too hot but still allow you to feel the warmth of the sun. The cabins look like one of the fancy ones you see on a commercial trying to get you to stay at a lodge in Tennessee, so I'm excited to see if the inside lives up to those expectations. I continue to admire the park around me as my dad searches for a place to park the car.

After we get out of the car, we start making our way to the check-in area for the retreat. It would've been impossible to miss the sign that said "Finding Light Retreat Check-in Here." It is at least 10 feet long and looks like it's been printed in bold, one thousand point font. I don't know if there are regular people just visiting the park right now but if there are, now they all know

there are a bunch of messed up teenagers here. I see a woman that looks really familiar and realize that she is my nurse, Chelsea, from when I was in the hospital. She waves at my family and gestures for us to walk towards her.

“Hey y’all! How are y’all doing? I’m glad you guys could make it,” says Chelsea.

“We are doing just fine, thank you for asking. The drive here was beautiful even though we had to deal with the kids snoring the whole way here,” my dad says as he smiles and softly bumps me with his elbow.

“That’s so great,” Chelsea says, “Y’all can just head to the main cabin to check-in and get all of the paperwork for the retreat signed. I’ll see how Jabari and Halle are doing once everyone is settled.”

As we approach the cabin I can feel my heart rate start to increase. This is it. I’m about to get the first glimpse of the people I’m going to spend the next six weeks with. I wonder what they will be like. I wonder if they are just as nervous about meeting me as I am about meeting them. We are just about to walk in when I notice that my shoe is untied. Normally, I always check for that sort of thing before I enter a room but I was too distracted by all of my thoughts. The only reason I realized that my shoe is untied is when I step on my shoelace and stumble over my feet. Lucky for me, no one seemed to notice but that doesn’t stop my cheeks from blushing bright red.

We all go to the welcome table and my parents sign us in. Jabari and I had to turn in our phones in exchange for our nametags. The counselors say that we do not need our phones because we will be too busy having fun and they don’t want our phones to be a distraction. I think it’s because they know we’ll probably try to call our parents or friends to break us out of

here. I don't really mind being without a phone but if my Snapchat streaks die, I'm going to be crushed. I had a feeling that my phone would be taken at this retreat so I gave Maya my Snapchat password so she can keep up with my streaks just in case.

My parents finish signing all of the paperwork and we head back to the car so we can get all of our stuff out. On our way to the car, I notice that I'm smelling something a little skunky so I let my parents walk a few steps ahead of me. This is a smell that I could recognize from anywhere. I sniff the air a little harder and I know that I'm smelling exactly what I think I am. I grab the back of Jabari's shirt and yank him towards me.

"Jabari do you smell that," I say quietly so that our parents don't hear.

"Do I smell what?" Jabari asks, looking around very confused.

"*That*. Sniff really hard," I say.

Jabari sniffs the air and I watch his facial expression change from confusion to pure amusement as he realizes what I've been smelling.

"Damn somebody is smoking that gas!"

"Shut up Jabari! Our parents will hear you!"

Jabari and I look around to see if we can find whoever is smoking.

"Look, it's that guy over there behind those trees," he says.

I look to see where Jabari is pointing when I catch my first glimpse of him. I can't see him clearly but from what I can see, I like. Tall, dark, and handsome. He is leaning against the tree softly smoking a joint, looking as if he has not one care in the world. I would never be bold enough to openly smoke at a state park. In fact, I never smoke at all. Maya and I tried it once at a party last summer but I hated all the coughing and I ended up getting super paranoid. Jabari has

never smoked before either but he's used to smelling it in his friend's older brother's car each time he picked them up from basketball practice.

Jabari walks a little faster to catch up with our parents but I linger a little longer to watch the boy. I've never been good at doing anything sneakily and this moment was no different. He must have heard my shoes crushing all the leaves because he turns around from leaning on the tree and sees me. He doesn't say anything nor does he stop smoking. He just winks at me and goes back to leaning on the tree. That wink made my heart leap. I drop my gaze from him to the ground and speed up to catch the rest of my family.

Once we have we grabbed all of our stuff from the car, my mom goes with me to the girls' cabin and my father goes with Jabari to the guys' cabin. I am the third girl to check-in to the retreat out of seven, so most of the beds are still up for grabs. I place my stuff on the bed that is in the back left corner of the room. This way I'll be able to see everything going on in the room but I'll still be slightly to myself if I want to be. As soon as Jabari and I have chosen our beds and gotten settled, we all meet back up to say goodbye to our parents.

"Alright now, your mom and I are going to head back home. Y'all have a good time and take care of each other," my father says.

"Be safe and make sure to call us when they give y'all time to use your phones. Let me know if you need anything and I'll come back up here," my mother says.

"Don't worry Mom. We'll be fine. I'll make sure to keep an eye out for this one," my brother says.

"Yeah right Jabari. It'll be the other way around. I'll be making sure you don't mess with any skunks in the woods."

Jabari laughs and my memory flashes back to the cute boy I saw in the woods. I wonder if he is participating in the retreat too or if he is just enjoying the park. I secretly hope that he is here for the retreat. I would do anything to see what he looks like up close.

The moment I see my parents drive off, the realization starts to kick in that I'm really not leaving this place for the next six weeks. The camp counselors told us that everyone here for the retreat would meet in the main cabin at 5 p.m. for a welcoming ceremony but that is thirty minutes from now. In the meantime, I go to my cabin to grab a book to read by the lake. Jabari was going to come with me but he has already made friends with someone he met in the guy's cabin and they are going to play basketball at the court beside the main cabin.

There are a lot more girls checked-in to the retreat when I make it back to the girl's cabin. Every bed is filled and it looks like small friend groups are already forming. On the right side of the cabin, there are three white girls that look like they all come from rich prep schools. They are all dressed in the stereotypical soft girl aesthetic you see on *Pinterest*. Soft, pink makeup, dresses, cardigans, dainty jewelry, barrets, and *Doc Martens*. In the middle of the cabin are two mixed girls that I think are sisters because they look so similar. I'm not certain what they are mixed with but one of them looks Black and Hispanic while the other one looks Hispanic and White. In the back right corner directly across from my bed is the last girl. She is white but she doesn't look like she would fit in with the preppy girls. She is wearing baggy clothes that look ever so slightly overworn and she is reading a book to herself. I wanted to introduce myself to her but I got too nervous. Instead, I grab my book and head to the water.

Around 4:50 p.m., I meet back up with Jabari and we start heading to the main cabin for the welcoming ceremony. I expected to walk into a room filled with chairs in a big circle and that is exactly what I saw when I walked in. Great. Time for therapy session number one.

We take our seats in the circle and wait for the rest of the retreat attendees to file in. I am mindlessly picking at my cuticles when Jabari nudges me and gestures for me to look at the door. I look up and there he is. The boy we saw smoking in the woods comes walking in with two other guys and he sits directly across from me in the circle. I try not to look at him but it's hard not to. He is at least 6 feet tall with deep brown eyes, bushy eyebrows, full lips, and the flyest waves in his hair that I have ever seen. He is dressed in casual, but full drip with ripped jeans, a graphic tee, a gold chain, and Jordans.

I can't tell if I keep catching him staring at me or if it's him catching me staring at him. We continue with this back and forth eye dance until a woman stands up and starts talking. "Good afternoon everyone. My name is Doctor Mira Yang and I am the head psychiatrist here for the Finding Light Retreat. I am so happy that you were all able to make it, and I look forward to spending the next several weeks with you all. Over the course of the next six weeks, we will all embark on a personal journey to better understand ourselves and those around us. Before we begin we will start with staff introductions and then we'll move into hearing introductions from our retreat attendees." Three more adults stand up and introduce themselves. There is Mr. Thompson who is the head psychologist, and then there is Mrs. Young and Mr. Evans who are two more psychologists.

Now it is time for the attendees to introduce ourselves and I am eighth in line to speak. Doctor Yang said for us to introduce ourselves with our name, age, who we came with, where we

are from, and one interesting thing about us. I am only halfway paying attention to everyone introducing themselves because I am too busy panicking over what interesting thing I am supposed to say about myself.

First, there are the girls that I thought were sisters and I was right. Jenna and Aria are halvesisters, and are both fifteen years old from Madison, Mississippi. Jenna is double jointed in her elbows and Aria can say the alphabet backward. Next, there is Hunter and Lexi who are seventeen-year-olds from Gulfport, Mississippi. As soon as they announce that they are a couple, all I can think about is how long they'll be able to sneak around at this retreat together before they are caught. This retreat doesn't sound like a romantic getaway for a couple so I'm really curious about how they ended up here. Hunter can speak three languages and Lexi is a figure skater. The boy from the woods is up next to speak, and I hold my breath as I wait to finally hear his name.

"Wassup y'all, my name is James, I'm seventeen years old, I'm here with my little brother Steven and I'm from Jackson, Mississippi. One interesting thing about me is I like to write poetry."

Poetry? If I wasn't already completely infatuated with him before, I definitely am now. I can imagine his sultry deep voice reciting poetry to me while we sit by the lake. That thought is obviously my teenage expectations of romance speaking, but what else am I to think? I keep my eyes looking towards the ground as he speaks so we don't have to make eye contact but I can feel his eyes on me.

James' little brother Steven introduces himself next. He is fifteen years old and he has been playing the piano since he was four years old. Jabari introduces himself as my little brother

and tells people that he is fourteen years old. His interesting fact is that he can make anybody laugh. He proves it to everyone in the room by telling one of his famous jokes, causing the room to erupt in laughter. Once the laughing has died down a bit, I introduce myself. I planned to tell everyone that my interesting thing is that I'm on the track to being valedictorian at my school. I don't want to sound like I was bragging about myself though so I tell them that I like to bake cakes instead.

After me, there are sixteen-year-old best friends from Vicksburg, Mississippi, Alexander and Savannah. Lastly, there are the other two preppy girls, Abbey and Margo, from Biloxi, Mississippi and they are both seventeen. I don't remember what any of their interesting facts are but they all had something to do with dancing, cheerleading, or something like that.

When the last introduction is done, Doctor Yang stands back up to close out our meeting. She says, "Again, thank you all for taking the time out of your summer to spend time with us and to work on yourselves. I truly believe that this experience will change each of you in unique ways and I look forward to watching your growth. The caterers are bringing in our dinner now so after we eat, you are free to spend the rest of the evening however you please as long as you do not leave the property. Our counselors will do a head check to make sure everyone is in bed at 11 p.m. Enjoy the rest of your evening, get to know the people around you and we will all get started here first thing in the morning at 8 a.m."

When Doctor Yang is done talking, we all line up to get the food the caterers brought in and I end up behind James and Steven. It turns out that Steven is the friend that Jabari made in his cabin so they start talking. It'll be awkward if I don't talk to James now but I don't know what to say. I was about to tell him that I liked his shoes but he beats me to it and speaks first.

“So I saw you checking me out in the woods,” James says with a smirk.

I definitely was checking him out but he can’t know that so I scoff and say, “Haha, you wish. I was definitely not checking you out. I just started smelling something a little *skunky* if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, that’s the only way I’m going to make it hanging out here with no phone for six weeks. Let me know if you ever want to join me.” James flashes a smile at me and then goes to sit down next to Steven and some of the other guys.

When dinner is over, I go back to the cabin and read a book until I get tired. I go to bed that night with James on my mind and a little more eager to see what this retreat will have in store.

Chapter 4

Being honest

I woke up today feeling the oh-so-familiar fast beat of my heart that goes with every anxiety-filled morning. This is a little different than how I normally wake up though. I feel more of an excited or anticipating something type of anxiety and I know it's because of James. Our first group session starts at 8 a.m. but I overheard James telling some of the other guys that he likes to go for runs in the mornings so I set my alarm for 6:30 a.m., and I'm hoping I'll see him on the trails. I hop out of bed as quietly as possible to not wake any of the other girls, and I rush to grab my things so I can get dressed.

I'm not the type of person that exercises consistently anymore so I feel really out of breath even though I've only been running for three minutes. I start walking so I can catch my breath when I see James running in my direction. I don't know if he can tell that I am only walking so I start running again just in case. It only takes him about a minute or so to catch up to me.

"I didn't think anyone else here would be up this early running," James says.

"Yeah, I normally run every day." It's a lie but he looks impressed when I say it.

“Oh really? What’s your average mile time?” he asks.

“Something around seven minutes I think.” Another lie. I haven’t been able to run a mile in seven minutes since I ran cross country in middle school but that was years ago.

“Oh okay, so you think you’re a track star or something.” James flashes me a million-dollar smile and I hope that he thinks the blood rushing to my cheeks is just because I’m running.

I laugh and say, “I don’t know if I would say all of that, but I’m decently fast.”

“Let’s race then. If I win, you’ll owe me something one day,” he says.

“Okay, and what do I get when I win because there is no way you can beat me.”

He smiles at me again and says, “You can have whatever you want.”

“Bet, let’s do it. The first one to the end of the trail wins.”

I start running as fast as I can but I don’t come anywhere close to beating James. When I finally make it to the end of the trail I am panting harder than a hot dog in the summer. It takes me a few minutes to catch my breath but once I have, I look at James and say, “I totally let you win.” James laughs and tells me that now I owe him something. James pulls a joint out of his pocket and starts smoking it. I ask him if he does that every day and he says only when he needs to. I try to ask him what he means by that but he cuts me off and says that we should head back so we can get ready for the meeting.

Before the meeting starts I go to the guys’ cabin to get Jabari so we can go in together. I find Jabari on the ground next to his bed doing pushups. I swear he’s such a guy. I have never understood why boys will randomly want to start doing pushups. I help him count his pushups all the way to fifty and then we make our way to the main cabin.

The chairs in the cabin are still in a large circle and I have a feeling that they will remain that way for the entirety of this retreat. There is a table covered with muffins, bagels, eggs, bacon, fruit, water, and orange juice near the circle. I hadn't realized that I was hungry until I saw all of the food so I am really thankful that the retreat coordinators brought all of this. Doctor Yang welcomes us all in, tells us to help ourselves to the food, and that we will get started once everyone is done eating.

Breakfast ends around 8:30 a.m. and then we all go to take our seats in the circle. This is feeling a little like school because everyone goes to sit in the exact same seat they sat in last night. I was secretly hoping that I would get to sit next to James but oh well. Mrs. Young comes around and hands each of us a plain composition notebook. She tells us that each day we are expected to journal. Our journals don't have to be about anything specific. We are just supposed to write about whatever we are thinking about or feelings so we can release those emotions. She says that we won't have to share what we write in our journals with anyone but sharing is encouraged if we feel open to it.

"I know that all of you are probably wondering exactly what we will be doing for the next six weeks," Mrs. Young says. "I don't know if any of you are familiar with the 12 Steps of Recovery for Alcoholics Anonymous but we will do something modeled after it. Obviously, none of you guys are recovering from an alcohol addiction but we are all in recovery in some way.

Essentially, each week we will have a focus that somehow relates to one of the 12 Steps of Recovery. We will not look at every step and the steps we do look at will be modified to fit your specific situation. The first week we will look at honesty. As the week goes on you will figure out what that means and exactly how it relates to you. The following weeks we will focus on

faith, soul searching, acceptance, willingness, and we will finish with maintenance. Don't think too much about what each week will entail. Our main hope is for each of you to be open to the process."

Once Mrs. Young is done talking, we are given fifteen minutes to write. I wonder if anyone will actually share what they are writing in their journals. I used to write in a diary when I was younger and this assignment feels a lot like what I would do then. I want to hear what other people are thinking and feeling right now, but I don't know if I will be bold enough to share what is in my journal, at least not yet.

Tuesday, May 25th

Journal entry 1

we have only been here for not even a full day and I already feel overwhelmed. 12 Steps of Recovery? I know Mrs. Young said it would be different from that exactly but I'm scared. It sounds like we are going to be doing a deep dive into ourselves and if I'm being honest, I'm scared of what might be in me. I've felt anxious and depressed for years but I've never tried to get to the root of why I feel like this. It scares me. Feeling anxious or sad everyday is scary too though. I don't know how I feel anymore. I'm happy that Jabari is here with me. If it weren't for him, I don't think I'd have anyone else to talk to. I know it's only been a day but some of the other people here already seem more comfortable with each other. I won't be able to share how I feel if I don't feel close to the people I'm around. I want to be close to people but I get so nervous when I'm around a lot of people and I feel like I'm not really being myself. Even if I could be myself, I'm not sure I know what that really looks like. Hopefully, over the next few weeks I'll be able to figure it out. It seems like

James may be a little into me which makes me excited because I'm a little into him too.
I've never been in a real relationship though so I don't want to get my hopes up too high on that. I'll just see what happens.
-xo Halle

Mrs. Young asks us if anyone would like to share any of our thoughts when the writing period is over. No one raises their hand to volunteer and that is exactly what I thought would happen. Asking someone to share their deepest thoughts with a room full of strangers is a lot to ask of anyone. The room sits in an awkward silence for over ten minutes when Hunter decides to be the first to break the silence.

“Um, I guess I’ll go,” he says. “I just wrote about how I don’t know what to expect out of this retreat. Like, some of us are here to be a support system so I’m not sure what we will be doing if we aren’t the ones in recovery or whatever or what we can expect to get from this.”

“Thank you for sharing Hunter. You brought up a good question. As you all may know, half of you were recommended to come to this retreat and the other half of you are here to support those recommended to come. Even if you are only here to be a support system, there is still a lot that you can gain from this retreat outside of being emotional support.”

Hunter looks down and says, “But what if we don’t know how to be emotionally supportive. Sometimes I don’t know what to say or how to comfort.” I see a few people nodding their heads in agreement with Hunter which I’m assuming means they are the ones being supporters as well. “It looks like a few of you are relating to what Hunter is saying. Would anyone else like to share their thoughts on being emotionally supportive,” Mrs. Young asks.

Jenna speaks next and says, “I guess I’ll go. I don’t really know how to be emotionally supportive either. I want to be there for my sister but sometimes all I can do is just listen. I feel like that isn’t enough sometimes though.”

“Even though some of you may feel inadequate when it comes to supporting your loved ones, a lot of the time, all your loved ones need from you is just to be there,” Doctor Yang says, “you don’t need to have the magic words to make someone feel better. Your presence alone and a listening ear go a lot further than you may think, and your loved ones will feel that you care. It could also be beneficial to ask your loved ones what they need from you to feel supported.”

“That is exactly right,” Mrs. Young says, “listening and being there are all part of holding space for someone. Holding space has immeasurable value and we will all practice a lot of it during this retreat. In fact, each of you is already doing it right now by allowing your peers to share their thoughts. Would anyone else like to share what is on your mind?”

Another few minutes of silence go by and no one speaks. I’m honestly surprised that we have gotten this far. I wonder if Jabari feels the same way as Hunter and Jenna. He hasn’t said anything but I can tell that he wants to because he is tapping his foot. He only does that when something is on his mind. I totally get what Mrs. Young and Doctor Yang were saying when they were talking about holding space. All I want is for someone to listen to me but I’d have to be noticed first. I don’t mean like actually being physically seen but rather for someone to notice that I’m struggling despite the smile I keep on my face.

Jabari is still tapping his foot so I nudge him and whisper to him to say whatever is on his mind. Doctor Yang notices when I nudge Jabari so she asks him if he would like to share with the group. He tells her that he isn’t ready right now which sends her on a long tangent about how

there is no rush to share and that the more we talk about our emotions the easier it will be. Or something like that.

After Doctor Yang's little speech, Mr. Thompson gives us instructions for our first activity. The counselors want all of us to be closer to each other so today we have to do a series of ice breakers. I see the benefit of ice breakers but they typically make everyone involved uncomfortable but I guess there can be bonding in that. I'm honestly a little excited to get to know everyone better since we will be spending so much time together. Hopefully, all of these exercises will give me someone to talk to other than Jabari. I love him to death and I'm so happy that he's here with me, but I really want to talk to the other retreat attendees that are closer to my age.

When we first got to the retreat, we filled out a questionnaire with information about ourselves like our birthday, favorite color, favorite foods, and our general interests. It was essentially one of the things people fill out for a teacher every single year of grade school. Mr. Thompson used our questionnaires to make a bingo card with statements that could apply to several of us. Our task is to mingle around and find people who can sign their name to a square to show that it applies to them. The catch is that we can only have two signatures per square. Mr. Thompson tells us that we have fifteen minutes to try to fill out our bingo card and that the first two people to get bingo will get a prize.

We start doing the activity and it seems like only thirty seconds have passed before I see people scribbling away on their bingo cards. I only have a signature from Jabari and Jenna right now but I am extremely competitive, despite my shyness, and I'm going to have to majorly pick up the pace if I want to win.

In situations like this where I need to be social, I try to tap into my alter ego. I call her Tammy and she first came to be when I was in 7th grade going to the winter dance. All of my friends were dancing and having a good time but I was so worried about what other people would think of me so I just stood around. I wanted more than anything to dance with my friends so I came up with Tammy. At the time, I tapped into Tammy by downing two bottles of rootbeer which I equated to being my version of alcohol because it made me so jittery and excited. I know that doesn't make any logical sense but whatever floats my boat, right? Anyways, Tammy helped me to have an amazing time that night and any other night that requires me to be outgoing. Tammy isn't anything crazy like a split personality, she is just confident and ready for whatever comes next.

Now that I am feeling all the confidence of Tammy, I sashay around the room and fill up almost every square. I only need one more signature to make a bingo and I think I should be able to get it before anyone else can beat me. I've spoken to almost everyone but I've been avoiding James. I'm almost certain I will get nervous all over again when I have to talk to him. I've kept him in my peripheral vision this entire activity and now I see him walking towards me.

"It looks like you are about to get a bingo. Wow, I'm impressed. Let me see what you have left," James says.

I show him my card and he smiles. My heart jumps once again and I wonder if that'll happen every time he smiles at me.

"It looks like you are in luck, I can sign one of the squares you need to get a bingo but you are going to have to work for it."

I roll my eyes in a playful way and say, “What is it now James? You want me to say I’ll do something else whenever you ask for it?”

He laughs and says, “Nah, I’m just going to save that one. I meant that you’re going to have to ask me questions to figure out which one applies to me. I want to get to know you.”

I blush when he says this and look at my card to see what squares I have left so I can gauge what questions I need to ask him. The only squares I have left are about having a pet, unique food preferences, and special talents.

“Okay, so do you like animals?” I ask.

“I do. I’ve always wanted a dog but my mom is allergic. When I move out I want to adopt a dog from the shelter,” he says.

“I guess that means you can’t sign the having a pet square. I have a labrador mix named Tucker. My family and I found him abandoned by a trash can when he was only a few weeks old. He’s the sweetest dog ever.”

“Oh, word? I hate that he was abandoned but he’s lucky to have found someone like you to care for him. He must be living the dream now. Maybe I’ll get to meet him one day. What other questions do you have for me?”

I was so consumed by thoughts of James meeting my dog one day that I had forgotten to think of what to ask him next. I glance at the card again to see what I should ask.

“Well, I already know you write poetry which is definitely a special talent. Is that your square?” I ask.

“I wouldn’t consider poetry a special talent but I’m flattered that you think it is. I think of special talents being like saying the alphabet backward or speaking multiple languages or something like that. That’s not my square, try again.” James says.

He looks really amused and I can tell he is enjoying making me work for his signature. I secretly love it but he doesn’t need to know that.

“That only leaves unique food preferences then. Are you like a vegan or something?” I ask.

“No, but you’re close. I’ve been a vegetarian since I was a kid,” he says.

“Really? I couldn’t do it. I tried once but I love burgers too much. What made you want to be a vegetarian?” I ask.

“When I was little, my family and I would go visit my grandparents on their farm. They had these chickens that I would like to run and play with and I named one of them Sam. One night we all had barbeque chicken for dinner and then the next day there was no Sam. I never ate meat again.”

“Woah, that’s actually really sad. I’m sorry that happened to you. I probably wouldn’t eat meat again either.” I say.

“No worries, that was years ago. Let me sign your card though, I guess you deserve a bingo.” he says.

I hand James my card and he signs it with surprisingly beautiful penmanship. I yell out bingo and just a few seconds later, so does James.

“How did you get bingo so fast?” I ask James.

He smiles and says, “I had bingo the first five minutes of this activity. I just wanted another reason to come talk to you.”

James and I walk to the counselors to claim our prizes. I don't know what I expected the prizes to be but I was pleasantly surprised to find out that it was a twenty-dollar Visa gift card. Whenever I finally get to leave this place, I'm going straight to Ulta to use the gift card to buy some new makeup.

Once everyone has finished filling out their bingo cards, we all sit back in a circle to share one thing we learned about someone in the group. Sharing goes a little like this: Jenna has a cat named Mister, Aria has broken three bones, Hunter wants to be a firefighter, Lexi can lick her elbow, James is a vegetarian, Jabari wants to be a professional basketball player, Steven loves to dance, Alexander wants to be a nurse, Savannah has read over 500 books, Abbey's favorite color is black, Margo has two horses, I know sign language.

As we are all sharing what we learned about one another, I notice that James isn't here anymore. I ask Jabari if he knows where he went and he said that James got a nosebleed so he had to go see Nurse Chelsea. James getting a nosebleed seems really random and bizarre; I hope that he's alright.

Yesterday went better than I expected. I thought we would've spent more time talking about feelings and such but our counselors say we are easing in slowly so as to not overwhelm us. It makes sense though considering we have a full six weeks. We spent the rest of the day doing more ice breakers, playing volleyball, and watching movies. I ended up hanging out with Savannah and Alexander a lot, and I'm happy that I have found my people. I saw Savannah reading a book that I had read so we clicked over that, and once Alexander complimented my outfit, I knew we were going to be friends.

Apparently, today we are going to get into the harder stuff, and I'm not looking forward to it. I planned to wake up early again so I could run with James but I'm so sore from yesterday that it hurts to walk. That's what I get for trying to impress a boy and be athletic.

After breakfast, we are given times to meet with our individual counselors. My counselor is Mr. Evans and I'm supposed to meet with him in an hour. In the meantime, I go look for Jabari so I can check in with him. I was busy yesterday hanging out with my new friends, and Jabari was busy hanging out with Steven and James, so I'm eager to see how he's doing. I find Jabari on the basketball court and I call him over so we can talk.

"Hey bro, how was your first day?" I ask.

"It was pretty chill. Steven is really cool, I like hanging with him. I think his older brother James has a crush on you," he says.

"What? Why do you think that?" I ask. I can tell that James has an interest in me but I want to know what Jabari knows.

"When me and Steven were playing ball, James kept bringing you up, asking questions about you, and all that," he says.

"So what did you tell him?" I ask.

"Just little stuff like how you read and your other interests. He's a cool dude though, you should give him a shot" he says.

"You know I don't have time for boys Jabari. Besides, as soon as this retreat is over, James will forget all about me. Enough about James though, how are you really? Why didn't you talk during the group session yesterday? I could tell you wanted to," I say.

"I don't know dude. I just wasn't ready," he says.

“I feel that. I wasn’t ready to talk either. I’m curious though, what was on your mind?” I ask.

Jabari looks down and says, “That I’m scared you will try to hurt yourself again and I won’t be able to stop you.”

I’m silent for a moment. That is the last thing I expected him to say. Suddenly I’m reminded that I’m supposed to be convincing everyone that it was an accident so I say, “I-I didn’t try to harm myself, Jabari. I just had a really bad headache, I promise.”

“Look Halle, you can tell our folks that and maybe they believe you but I don’t buy it. I know you. You’ve been sad for a while and I can see that you are hurting,” he says.

“I’m sorry Jabari. I don’t want you to be worried about me. I won’t do that again,” I say.

“Don’t apologize. I’m the one that should be saying sorry. I should’ve checked in with you but I never know what to say, kind of like Hunter and Jenna were saying yesterday. Let’s make each other a promise though, if we are going through something, we will talk to each other. I’ve got your back just like you have mine. Deal?” he says.

“Deal.” I say.

When I get to Mr. Evans office, I spend the first ten minutes writing in my journal.

wednesday, May 26th

Journal entry 2

I didn't wake up anxious this morning for the first time in I don't know how long. I don't know why I didn't wake up anxious today but it feels so good to wake up without feeling like my heart is going to burst. I know this won't last forever though. My conversation with Jabari has put me in my head a little. He's my little brother and I'm supposed to be looking out for him, not the other way around. My crush on James is definitely growing but I wonder

how he will feel once he finds out more about me. No one wants a girlfriend that they are worried is about to go over the edge. I'm really glad that I worked up the courage to talk to Savannah. I was worried that I wouldn't make any friends here but she is really nice and she reminds me a lot of Maya. Her friend Alexander is really cool too and we are bonding over fashion. He told me that he has a crush on Steven and I'm secretly hoping they get together because they would honestly make the cutest couple ever. Anyways, Mr. Evans says it's time for us to talk so I guess that's all for now.

-xo Halle

Mr. Evans asks me how my first day went and I tell him that it was fine. I have never spoken with a therapist or counselor or whatever Mr. Evans is supposed to be to me. I don't know how much I am supposed to say and I really don't know what to say. I know he can tell that I am feeling a little nervous so he takes me through a few breathing exercises to calm me down. He says that he is here to support me and that he wants me to feel comfortable with him. Admittedly, after the breathing exercises, I feel more at ease.

He begins by asking me what brought me here today. What kind of question is that? I'm obviously here because my parents forced me to come here. Therapists always make questions feel so big. I feel like you can never give them a simple answer unless you want that answer to be followed by ten more questions. I tell him that I am here because my parents want me to learn better coping mechanisms. He then asks me what I am trying to cope with so I tell him that sometimes I feel a little anxious and sad. My situation is honestly a lot bigger than that but I don't see how this one man can make any of that better. "I see," he says, "The goal of this week

is to focus on honesty. What do you think that means?" I *honestly* have no clue. Well, I guess that's not true. I think it means that the counselors want us to be honest with ourselves and them. What they want us to be honest about is the question I still have. "Um," I say, "I guess it means that you don't want us to lie."

Mr. Evans goes on to talk about how in life, we will tell ourselves little lies. These lies can build insecurities within us and, essentially, cause us to have unnecessary internal turmoil. The lies can be a variety of things such as maybe thinking you aren't pretty enough or smart enough, or maybe you convince yourself that you aren't safe or that the world is against you. Whatever your lie is, it is something that is holding you back from living as your free, true self. It all sounds way too deep for me but that is what I'm here for, right? I don't know what my lie is but Mr. Evans says that a way we can figure it out is for me to write about the first instance where I didn't feel okay. No matter how young I was or what was going on, I'm just supposed to write about the first time I felt anxious.

After I finish writing, I tell Mr. Evans about what I wrote and he helps me to shine a light on that situation. He says that anxiety often comes as a way for the mind to protect itself because, for some reason, our body feels like it is in danger. If that is true, I really wish my mind would stop trying to protect me. This "protection" just stresses me out and makes me feel like I can't breathe. That is in no way helpful. I ask him how I can make myself feel better and he says that it will take time and practice. I wish there was a magic remedy to all of this mental health stuff but I guess that would make life too easy. We spend the rest of the session talking about my childhood so Mr. Evans can have a better understanding of what has shaped me into the mess I am today.

The next few days seem to fly by. We have more group sessions where we talk about uncovering the lies that we tell ourselves. Today is Saturday and tonight we are to have a big bonfire where we will all share our truths which is, essentially, the reason why we are attending the retreat. Basically, we are supposed to share with everyone what the hell is wrong with us that has caused us to need to spend over half the summer working on our mental health. I still need to figure out what I'm going to say and the anticipation is killing me. I know what I *need* to say but facing that reality is something I will have to do when the moment actually comes.

It's time. Everyone at the retreat meets by the bonfire for our truth reveal. Before we share our truths, we all make smores and roast hot dogs. I'm too nervous for the reveal to eat but I try to eat a few hot dogs. Lexi must be feeling just as nervous as me because I notice that she isn't eating much either.

"So by now, you all know each other. Hopefully, over the course of this past week you were all able to bond with one another and feel more comfortable with sharing your emotions," Doctor Yang says. "Tonight you are all taking a large step in your personal journeys of growth. As mentioned during our first meeting this week, we are opening up and focusing on honesty. After the group session and meetings with your individual counselors, I'm sure you all know what we mean by being honest. We will each share our truth one at a time. We won't unpack everyone's truth tonight but rather this is just an opportunity to find a sense of release. Whoever is ready to go first may start us off."

I feel it coming now. I haven't felt anxious for the past few days but it is back with a roaring vengeance. This week has helped me figure out part of why I feel this way right now but

saying it out loud is going to make it real. I don't think I'm ready for this. My thoughts are interrupted when Savannah stands up to share her truth.

"I'll go first," she says, "I have been struggling with depression for the past few years. I've done okay with trying to cope with it but my thoughts are becoming too much to handle."

James stands up to go next and I feel my heart starting to beat faster and faster as I wait to hear what he will say.

"Sometimes I feel like I don't know who I really am. I second guess all of my thoughts and it is as if I don't trust my own mind. That's why I write poetry. It helps me to get my emotions out even if I don't know what's real."

Alexander goes next.

"I've been cutting for about two years now," he says. "About a month ago, I was in the bathtub and I cut my wrist really deep. I watched the tub turn red and I just let it happen. My parents found me before it was too late."

Woah. I already knew this sharing session was going to be deep but I didn't expect someone that looks as happy as Alexander to be carrying something so heavy. Now that I think about it, I didn't notice until now how Alexander almost always has on a long sleeve shirt despite it being so hot and humid here. It always seems to be the little signs that people miss.

Jabari stands up to speak next and I hold my breath again as I wait to hear his truth. Jabari says, "I really want to be a pro baller so I try to outwork everyone that I can. My dad is really hard on me about my game, and I feel like nothing I ever do is good enough."

I had no idea Jabari was feeling this way. Not good enough? How could he think that? I barely know anything about basketball and even I can tell that Jabari is exceptional. I put my arm

around him and give him a quick squeeze while we listen to everyone else share. James's little brother Steven stands up to speak.

"My stepdad caught my best friend, Marcus, and I kissing in my room a year ago. I hadn't come out to my family yet and neither had he. My family was pretty okay with it but when Marcus's parents found out, his dad beat him so badly that he was in the hospital for two days." Steven looks down and I notice the tears running down his face that have been illuminated by the firelight. "Marcus hung himself two weeks later." Another pause. "He was everything to me. I've been depressed ever since and it's hard to find reasons to keep going. If it weren't for my older brother, James, I don't know where I would be right now. James is going to college next year though and I don't want him to stay behind for me."

Seeing Steven cry makes me want to cry but I stick my tongue to the roof of my mouth to hold them in. James pats his little brother on the back, wipes his tears, and gently places his hand under Steven's chin to lift his head high. He whispers something inaudible for me to hear to Steven but whatever it is, I can tell that it brought Steven some peace. Once James finishes talking to Steven, Lexi stands up to go next.

"I don't like eating that much because I'm worried that I'll get too big," she says. "There are no overweight professional figure skaters. If I do eat, sometimes I make myself sick after but not as much as I used to. I feel like I have gotten better, and I'm proud of the progress I've made but I'm stuck at this point. I want to go out with my friends when they go to restaurants but I say no and then I miss out. I feel like I am pushing away everyone I hold close."

I think that Lexi looks perfect. I hate how society and the media have convinced women and girls that there is something wrong with our bodies. Just for a check-in though, I am literally

so anxious and trying not to throw up right now. Only Aria, Hunter, Margo, Abbey, and I are left to share our truth. I definitely don't want to be the last person to share because then I'll be the last thing on everyone's mind. Half of us are already crying and I've been doing my best to hold back my own tears. If I start crying, I won't stop. Before I can even realize what I'm doing, I am standing up and all eyes are on me.

"I struggle with anxiety and depression," I say. Whew, that was hard to say. The first part is done, now for the rest. I continue, "A few weeks ago I took a bunch of pills and I ended up in the hospital." I pause and look at Jabari who gives me a reassuring nod to keep going. "I told the doctor and my family that it was an accident but...that was a lie," my voice is shaking now. I keep telling myself that I can do it. I just have to get the words out. "The truth is I tried to kill myself."

I did it. I really spoke those words. It feels so much more real now. I'm nervous about what the realization of this truth means for my life but I know I can't stay where I am right now. Jabari squeezes me tight and tells me that he is proud of me. I'm proud of myself too. Abbey takes an audible deep breath and I see her standing up out of the corner of my eye.

"I also struggle with anxiety," Abbey says. "Whenever there are things I know I need to get done, I push them off because I'm too anxious to do them but then I feel anxious about the fact that I haven't done anything. It is a constant battle of overthinking and overanalyzing every situation, every conversation, every moment, just everything. It keeps me from going to sleep at night but at the same time, it makes it hard to get out of bed in the morning."

The last thing I expected was to relate so closely to a girl that couldn't possibly look more different from me than Abbey. I want to go to her, tell her that I understand and that she

isn't alone. A lot of people like to say that they "understand" people with anxiety but you can never truly understand that unless you've felt it.

"I'll go next," Hunter says. "My dad is really hard on me too but about school stuff. He's always talking about me getting into Harvard, going to law school, and living up to our family name. I don't even want to be a lawyer. I want to be an engineer but for whatever reason, that isn't good enough. I just want to be myself and have a family that supports me. I want to talk to my folks about it but they'll never understand."

Right after Hunter finishes talking, Aria begins.

"Whenever I get stressed, or sad, or angry, or honestly even if I'm really happy, I respond to that emotion by overeating. Food is my go-to in every strong emotional aspect of my life but it especially is when I'm feeling down. I'll eat too much and then it pulls me into a hole that I can't get out of," she says.

Then Margo speaks.

She says, "I am sad almost all of the time. Not in a 'I'm about to cry' type of way but in a 'I feel really down and disinterested in life' type of way. I feel like I am going through the motions in my life."

All I can think when Margo says this is me too, girlfriend. Me too. Jenna goes last and all eyes are on her as we await the final truth.

"I've never met my mother and I never will," she says. "She had complications when I was born and she didn't make it. I've spent my entire life carrying that guilt."

The heavy ends.

Once we are done sharing our truths, the counselors share a few of their stories, and then Mr. Evans closes us out.

“Thank you all for sharing,” Mr. Evans says. “I admire the courage and respect for one another that each of you have shown tonight. The first step is hard. Being able to admit that there is actually something going on and that we need help is the most important realization to make in this journey. Each of us has something we are struggling with here but we can work through it together. Tomorrow is a free day so rest up, enjoy yourselves, and we will get back to it on Monday morning.”

We all stay at the bonfire a while longer just to hang out and I can feel that we are all even closer. How could we not be after all of that? For the first time in a while, I feel excited for my future. Step one: honesty. Check.

Chapter 5

Keeping the Faith

I woke up this morning with one really big realization on my mind: I still don't want to be here. As in, I still want to see what's on the other side of all of this. For some reason, I had the preconceived notion that once I speak my problem out loud, it'll go away. Let me go ahead and say now that I am very wrong. Announcing my problem means that it has been fully presented in front of me and let me tell you another thing, she's huge. I admitted what I did and I've, as all the counselors here like to say, *found my truth*. But now what? I've found it and now I want to get rid of it. Is that even possible? What if it isn't? Ugh, I hate overthinking.

I make it out in time to catch James on his morning run. Last week, if I wasn't with Jabari or Savannah and Alexander, I was with James. I don't want to say that he's "not like all the other boys I've met" because it sounds disgustingly cliché but it is honestly the truth. I don't know what it is, but something about him captivates me.

He normally runs about three miles each morning so I've started joining in around the mile and a half mark because if I tried to keep up with him, I'd probably break my legs. Obviously, I don't mean that literally but you get what I mean. I am also one hundred percent,

big time crushing on him now, but we all already know that. After we finish running, James tells me to meet him at our spot when we are done with today's activities. For whatever reason, him saying this makes me nervous. This is going to be on my mind all day now.

At our large group session, Mr. Evans tells us that he will be leading most of our sessions this week and that this week is all about faith. Faith immediately makes me think about religion but if I am being honest, I'm not sure if I completely buy into the whole religion thing. It's not that I don't believe there is some higher power out there because I do. Like, how else would we have all gotten here if someone or something didn't put us here? My problem with religion is that I don't like how society has contorted it to fit people's own selfish interests. If it is saying someone is going to hell for not believing in whoever or for loving someone, I don't really jive with it. My parents have had Jabari and I go to church every Sunday since we were born up until about a year ago. All of our lives got busier so Sundays turned into days of real rest but I never minded it.

Anyways, I am highly relieved when Mr. Evans assures us that this week is not necessarily about religion and that we will grow from this week regardless of our stance on religion. Before Mr. Evans does his spiel on whatever faith is supposed to mean, we are given fifteen minutes to write in our journals. Since we are in week two, we are all expected to share something from our journal when the writing period is over. This would've sounded really scary to me last week but I feel a lot more comfortable with everyone considering we have all shared so much. None of us seem to feel like we are on two different sides anymore. Meaning, it doesn't feel like half of us are here to work on getting better and the other half of us are just here to hold somebody's hand. We are all in this together now.

Monday, May 31st

Journal entry 6

Last week was a lot for me and it was a lot in so many ways. Everything was all about being honest with ourselves about how we ended up where we are and I've done that. Everyone at this camp knows my truth but at least I know that I'm not alone. Recognizing that I need help and hearing that other people, even people that I didn't expect, have the same struggles as me gives me a lot of comfort. Despite all of the comfort that knowing I'm not alone has brought me, I still don't want to be alive. I promised Jabari that I would never try to hurt myself again but I can't shake the thought that everything would be so much easier if I wasn't here anymore. I feel like the only thing keeping me here right now is that I don't want to hurt any of my family. Seeing my parents cry and the pain in Jabari's eyes kills me. All of that happened just because I attempted to die so I can't even begin to imagine the pain I would bring them if I were to ever successfully go through with it. I won't do that to them, I can't. The problem with that is though, now I feel like I'm only living for them and to shield them from pain. But what about my pain? what about how I feel? Living for someone else isn't enough for me. I want to find a reason that will make me still want to be here if that is even possible. I secretly fear that it isn't. I haven't felt as anxious here as I have felt at home but I still feel it. The times that I hate the most are when it seems like I get anxious over seemingly little things like waiting in line to get food. I have admitted that I feel depressed and anxious but I still don't know why. I guess Mr. Evans and I will unpack all of this at some point this week.

-xo Halle

When it is time to share, Mr. Evans asks us how we are feeling after our first week. From now on, every time we begin or end a session, we will all go around and say how we are feeling using one to three emotions from the feelings wheel. I know that a feeling wheel sounds really cheesy and childish but it is actually surprisingly very helpful. Sometimes I don't necessarily know how I am feeling so looking at the wheel helps me to place a label on my emotions. Right now, all of our emotions are like this: overwhelmed, guilty, confused, helpless, thoughtful, aware, and hopeful. So basically we are all over the place.

Steven talks about how sharing our truths stirred up a lot of emotions in him that he doesn't know how to deal with now. We have all subconsciously pushed whatever we are dealing with down and now that it's all on the surface, we are lost. Abbey talks about how she feels like she isn't in control of her emotions which I one thousand percent understand because I feel that way every day. Mr. Evans says that we need to keep in mind that we are not our thoughts and just because we think something, that doesn't make it true. I haven't fully wrapped my brain around that concept. Whenever we feel like we don't understand what we are feeling, Mr. Evans wants us to write about it and then come back to it when our mind is clear so we can evaluate the situation.

"As I was saying earlier," Mr. Evans says, "this week our focus is on faith. Not faith in a religious sense but rather faith as in trust. The dictionary definition of faith is complete trust or confidence in someone or something. Keeping that in mind, this week you all will work to strengthen your relationship and build trust with your counselor but more importantly, for you to build trust with yourself. This self-work won't work unless you put in the work to make it

successful. If you are under the perception that you will forever be stuck where you are or that things won't get any better, you will prove yourself right. On the other hand, if you have faith in yourself and the people in your life that are here to support you, you will get better. That is not to say that this is a magical process that will happen overnight because it won't. It is a constant practice and this week we will all work on it."

Each time Mr. Evans puts the words faith and trust in the same sentence together I can't help but think about how those are the key components of being able to fly. At least that's the case in *Peter Pan*. All I need is a little faith, trust, and pixie dust to fly away from all of this. Flying away and not having to worry about anything is a pipe dream and right now, that's how getting better feels too. I don't mean to sound like a cynic because that's truly not who I am at all. It's just that I have felt this way for so long it's hard to imagine a different life for me. I know that anxiety and depression is not all that I am made of but sometimes I feel as though they are when they consume so much of my energy. I do want to be better though and I guess I need to start believing that I can be.

At the end of the day, I am getting ready to make my way to meet James at our spot when Savannah and Alexander come running up to me with huge grins on their faces. I don't know what they are about to tell me but I can already tell that it is something good.

"Hey guys, what's up? Y'all both look like the Cheshire cat with smiles that big," I say.

"Girl we have big news!" Alexander says. "Guess who likes you."

"Hmmmmmm," I say. "I'm going to take a wild guess and say James."

"Wait, what? How did you know that already? Did he tell you already?" Savannah asks.

"No, he hasn't told me anything. I can just tell that he's feeling me," I say.

“So what’s the tea? Tell us *everything*. This is so exciting! I love love!” Savannah exclaims.

I blush and say, “There isn’t much to tell. I first saw him the day we got here. He was smoking in the woods and I honestly thought he was really fine. I mean *fine* fine. We both run in the morning so we talk a lot then. I don’t actually like running but I want to see him, so I do it. Last week, when we did that bingo activity thing, he told me that he had gotten bingo by the time he got to me but that he just wanted to talk to me. That’s when I knew he liked me. Not to mention how my little brother, Jabari, told me that James was asking about me. He’s really cool.”

“Oh my gosh!” Savannah says. “The bingo thing was so romantic! I can’t believe you didn’t tell us this.”

“We still have some news for you! It’s about James,” Alexander says.

“*So* spill it then! I can’t handle the anticipation,” I say.

“The word on the street is that James has some sort of surprise planned for you tonight. I think it is some kind of date. He told Steven that he is really nervous about it because he doesn’t know if you are really feeling him or if y’all are just friends. *So* cute!” Alexander says.

A date? I’ve never been on a real date before. Ever. Unless making out in the backseat of a Toyota during lunch period when I was in 10th grade counts, but I highly doubt that.

“Wait, how do you know all this?” I ask.

“That’s the other thing we have to tell you,” Savannah says. “Go on, tell her!”

“Okay, okay I’ll tell her!” Alexander says. “Steven and I are kind of a thing. Well, we aren’t official or anything close to that but we had a moment.”

“*What?* Since when? How did this happen? Tell me *everything*,” I say excitedly.

“It all happened after the bonfire last night. After we all went back to our cabins, I had to come back out by the fire because I left my journal out there. I saw Steven sitting out there with his head in his lap. He looked like he was really in his head about something so I asked him what was wrong. He told me that after sharing he couldn’t stop thinking about Marcus and how he wished there was something he could’ve done to protect him. That’s when I told him how sorry for his loss I was and I told him my own coming out story. My parents weren’t very accepting of me in the beginning but they came around. I think knowing that even unaccepting parents can have a change of heart brought him a little comfort. Anyways, we stayed up for hours basically telling each other our entire life stories and we just clicked. I really like him and this morning he told me that he wants to see what happens with us.”

“Alexander! I am *so* happy for you! I don’t know that much about Steven but I know he and James are really close. James speaks highly of him,” I say.

“All of y’all should go on a double date or something. That would be so cute and fun!” Savannah says.

“Woah woah, slow down Sav,” I say laughing. “As of right now, James and I are still just friends. We will see what happens with us after whatever goes on tonight.”

“Well, after it happens, we want to be the first to know!” Alexander says.

After I finish talking to Alexander and Savannah, I run back to my cabin to change clothes. I planned to go meet James in what I had been wearing all day but now that I’ll be on some sort of date or something, I need to look the part. I don’t want to look too fancy or anything but I want to look better than just the jeans and tshirt outfit I have on. I rustle through all of the clothes I packed and none of them look like what I want to wear. Ugh, I hate this. This is exactly

why I normally don't even worry about boys. Now I'm all concerned about what I'm wearing, how my hair looks, how I smell, and all of that other "girl likes boy" type of stuff. I decide to wear a pink flowy shirt that looks like one of the shirts a pirate wears but it's fine because I look good in it. I complete my look with a blue jean mini skirt, pink sandals, and my gold chain necklace.

Right before I head out, something in me tells me to smell my armpits and I'm glad I do because they are smelling a little musty. Yikes. I run to grab my deodorant for my armpits and I go ahead and spritz myself with some perfume while I'm at it. When I'm all dressed, I pause for a minute or two to take a few deep breaths. In all of my rushing, I made myself anxious so now I'm making myself calm down before I go see James. Once I am feeling more relaxed, I run out of the cabin and make my way to our spot.

As I am walking towards our spot, I find James sitting on a blanket by a tree and gazing out at the lake. There is something else on the blanket but I can't tell what it is until I get closer. I am pleasantly surprised to find that the something I couldn't see is a picnic basket and freshly picked wildflowers. I sit down next to James and we both sit in silence for a few moments just looking at the beautiful scenery surrounding us.

James turns to look at me and he places his hand on my thigh. I swear that it makes my heart beat so fast and hard that I worry he'll be able to hear it. I turn to face him and our eyes lock. He leans in closer and tells me that he needs to tell me a secret. I turn my head and he cups his hand over my ear so he can whisper it to me. "I really like you," James says in a soft, sultry voice that almost makes me shudder. I turn to face him and say that I have a secret to tell him as well. "I really like you, too," I whisper.

James turns to face me again and I think he is about to kiss me when he pulls away to reach for the picnic basket. “Your brother told me that peanut butter and jelly sandwiches are one of your favorite foods so I asked my counselor to help me out so I could make these for you,” he says. A kiss would’ve been nice but the sandwiches are *so* good and I appreciate the effort on James’s part.

We eat our sandwiches as we watch the sunset and James reads me a few of the poems that he has written. He reads me one poem called “Like a Ghost” that is beautifully sad and almost brings tears to my eyes. It’s about his father and all of the memories of him that were left behind after he passed away a few years ago. James and I talk about our families for a while and I tell him that even though I know my family loves me, I feel like I can’t tell them anything. James and I relate to each other a lot when it comes to how we feel about our families and it is nice to know that someone else gets it. We both come to the conclusion that us not wanting to tell our parents stuff probably has a lot to do with us being teenagers and being at that “we know everything” stage as our parents so love to call it.

We have been talking for hours, and time has clearly gotten away from us because I hear Jabari yelling my name in the woods. Jabari and I are basically playing waterless Marco Polo until he finds us. Jabari comes running up to us out of breath and says that curfew is in five minutes. James tells me that he will clean up and for us to go ahead and go. The counselors always check the girls cabin first because it is the closest to theirs, so James will have a few extra minutes to make it back. Before I go, James pulls me close and slips a folded sheet of paper in my back pocket.

Jabari and I run back to the cabins and I make it to my bed right before the counselors come in. I immediately want to tell Savannah about what happened but I see her under the covers with her flashlight reading a book I let her borrow. Since she's up this late reading, I know she's gotten to the good part and I don't want to disturb her.

I wake up the next morning to find all of the other girls already up and getting ready. I overslept and missed my morning run with James. I hope he doesn't think that something is wrong but boys usually don't overthink things like that so we should be good. Savannah and I go meet up with Alexander so we can all eat breakfast together and I can fill them in about James. I notice that Alexander looks really tired and has deep bags under his eyes. I ask him if he's feeling okay and he tells us that he feels amazing. He and Steven stayed up all night again talking so he only got a few hours of sleep. I wish I could've stayed with James all night but that would require us to sneak out the cabins. I've never snuck out of anything before but James would totally be worth it.

At our large group session today, we talk a lot about how to build trust with ourselves and we are given an assignment. Our counselors want us to journal about what we would do on the last day of our life if we knew it was our last day. I write little stuff like watching the sunrise and sunset, eating at my favorite restaurants, reading at the park, and throwing a big party so I can tell all my friends and family how much they mean to me.

When we share our last days with one another, the one thing we all have in common is spending time with the people we care about. This brings Mr. Evans into talking about how part of having faith is trusting that the people we have in our lives are here to love and support us. If they are important enough for us to want to spend our last moments with, they are important

enough for us to let into even the darkest parts of us so they can help pull us out. I haven't really thought about my parents since I've been here but I'm suddenly reminded of them. This week we get to call home so it'll be nice to hear their voices again.

Part of our assignment for the week is to tell our parents what our truth is if we feel comfortable. I can't speak for anyone else but telling my parents that I actually did try to commit suicide is not a conversation I want to have over the phone. All of our families are supposed to come up here to get us the weekend before the Fourth of July break which seems like a much more appropriate time to tell them something so heavy. It is a truth that I know deep down they already know but that doesn't mean they are going to want to hear it. I might try to tell them when I call but I guess I'll see how it goes.

I have another session with Mr. Evans in about two hours so I go look for Jabari in the meantime. I find him and Steven playing on the basketball court, and I see Alexander watching like a proud boyfriend. They honestly make a really cute couple and I hope they stay together when this camp is over.

Speaking of couples, Alexander told me that Hunter and Lexi got in trouble last night for being out past curfew. I knew they would get caught eventually and I'm impressed they lasted over a week without getting caught. I bet that they would last four days and Jabari bet that they would last two weeks so now I owe him five dollars. Nothing really happened to Hunter or Lexi though. They were just given a warning but if they are caught again, their counselors will call their parents. I doubt the warning will do anything because we are teenagers and raging hormones is a real thing. They will just have to be sneakier. Alexander and I strategize with each other on how we can be out past curfew without being caught.

When Jabari and Steven are done playing ball, I call Jabari over so we can talk.

“When are you thinking about calling our parents?” I ask. “I think I’ll call them after my next session with Mr. Evans.”

“I don’t know dude. I guess I will whenever you do,” he says. “Are you going to do what the counselors said? You know, like tell them your truth and everything.”

“I was thinking about it but I don’t know yet. I don’t know how they’ll react,” I say.

“Yeah, I feel you. I’m not ready to have that basketball talk with dad. I want him to support me but he’s too hard on me sometimes,” he says.

“He honestly probably doesn’t realize how hard on you he’s being. He knows you want to go pro and he’s just trying to help motivate you. Give him a chance,” I say.

“That’s easy for you to say,” he says. “Dad has never been hard on you about anything. He tells you ‘good job’ just for breathing.”

It hurts a little when Jabari says this but I know he’s coming from a place of pain so I try not to take it too personally.

“Look Jabari, I understand more than anyone else how hard it can be to talk to our parents about stuff. I get it. The longer we are here, the more I’m realizing that if we need something or want something, we have to open our mouth and say so,” I say.

Jabari is quiet for a moment and then says, “How about we make another deal then. If you tell our parents your truth, I’ll tell them mine. We can tell them together. Deal?”

I think about it for a second. It will be hard telling my dad, especially since I promised him it was an accident. I have to take that leap of faith with my parents at some point, right? I might as well do it with Jabari by my side.

“Deal,” I say.

After I finish talking to Jabari, I go sit by the lake to read my book. I get lost in the book and I don’t realize when it is time for me to go to my session with Mr. Evans. It is really hard keeping track of time when you don’t have a phone. They gave each of us cheap Walmart watches with the other things we received during check-in last week but I forgot to put mine on this morning. The only reason I realize that I am late is because I see Abbey heading to her session and we usually have our sessions around the same time. I close my book and start booking it to make it to Mr. Evans’s office. I really need to get better about my time management because being late for stuff is one of those things that makes me anxious. I am relieved to see that Mr. Evans and I make it to his office at the same time.

We begin our session by checking in with how I am doing. I tell him about the realization I had when I woke up yesterday morning: I still don’t want to be here. I explain to him how hard it is to find reasons to live other than just being here for the sake of my family. This causes him to have a mini rant about finding things in life that bring me joy. I call Mr. Evans’s speeches rants as if they are something I don’t want to hear but he actually says extremely insightful things. The problem is, Mr. Evans says insightful things like *find things that bring me joy* but he doesn’t tell me how. He gives me a few moments to write in my journal and to think about my perspective on life.

Tuesday, June 1st

Journal entry 7

Mr. Evans asked me to journal about my perspective on life but I'm not sure what my perspective on life is. Most of the time, I think that life is pretty sucky. well, I don't mean

that. what I do mean is I think I could be enjoying life more than I am. I do well in school and I'm involved in a lot of clubs but I feel like something is missing. I often feel like I am just flowing through life in a lackadaisical manner and like I'm not all here. If I had to pick a philosophy on how I feel about life, I'd probably refer to what Forrest Gump said, "My mom always said life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get." Just like that. Even though people don't know what they will get in life, I guess the way your life goes is also up to the effort you put into it. Like, no one becomes a millionaire overnight. They have to work for it and it is a combination of little things that build up to big success. Pause. Am I having a breakthrough right now? Just like people have to put in the work to be millionaires, I have to put in the work to improve my mental health. Okay, cool. Got it.

-xo Halle

I tell Mr. Evans about my thoughts on basically being in control of my own life and he tells me that I am right on target. It feels nice to have this small affirmation because I've spent a lot of my time here feeling like I didn't know where my headspace is supposed to be heading. Even though I now realize I need to put in the work and be in control of my own happiness, I tell Mr. Evans that I don't know what steps I need to take to make that happen logistically. During week four, Mr. Evans says that we will focus mainly on specific things we can do to be in control of our emotions but for me to start with making a list of goals for myself. We won't meet again individually until Friday so I have until then to come up with a few things.

Today is Thursday, also known as field trip day, also known as my favorite day of the week at this retreat. We are traveling to a nearby college to do a challenge course. Now listen, I

know I said that I used to run cross country in middle school but that is as far as my athletic history goes. Hopefully running with James these past two weeks has helped to improve my athleticism and I won't embarrass myself too badly today.

Speaking of James, we've been so busy doing retreat activities this week that we haven't gotten to spend that much time alone. By the time we are done with activities each day, it's time for dinner and then curfew comes not long after or I'm busy hanging with Savannah. I would say we can sneak out like Lexi and Hunter do but we would need to form some kind of plan, which time hasn't allowed us to do. I also haven't read whatever the note he put in my pocket says. I'm a little nervous to read it and luckily he hasn't brought it up. I'm going to make it my mission to spend more time with him today though. I feel like our relationship, if you can even call it that, is progressing kind of slowly. Don't get me wrong, I love a good slow-burn, but only when I am reading one in a romance novel, not when I am living it.

We make it to the challenge course and our group is split into two teams. On one team there is Hunter, Savannah, Abbey, Jabari, Steven, and Margo and the other team is Lexi, Alexander, Jenna, Aria, James, and me. I am happy that I get to be on the same team as James because now I will get to spend the whole day with him. We all go into the locker rooms to change into the team t-shirts the challenge course leaders gave us and then we head to the main course field.

So as it turns out, this challenge course is a lot harder than I thought it would be but it is also more fun than I thought it would be. We have done three of the challenges so far and we have four more to go. So far we have done rock climbing and a few low ropes course activities like "The Mohawk Walk" and "Swinging Log". The next challenge is called "I believe I can fly"

and it is meant to help us build trust with our counselors. What happens is, I will be tied to a pulley-like system that will cause me to be suspended high in the air when the counselors run and pull it. It is like a trust fall with a twist because if the counselors don't carefully let me down, I will most definitely be hurt. The counselors will all have to work together to communicate when they are running and pulling, when are they releasing, and stuff like that.

The challenge course leaders help me get in the harness, and I walk over to get tied into the pulley system. I'm not the biggest fan of heights so I feel a little nervous now. This kind of reminds me of the feeling you get when you're waiting from the drop at the top of a rollercoaster. I love a good rollercoaster but I hate the drop. If the counselors pull me correctly, my stomach shouldn't drop so we'll see how it goes. Since Mr. Evans is my counselor, he will be leading the other counselors as they pull me. Before they pull me, I tell Mr. Evans not to let me fall and he says for me to have a little faith.

Once I am all attached, Mr. Evans yells out a countdown from ten and the counselors hoist me into the air. I am just above all the trees, and the world looks beautiful from here. I'm not up quite as high as birds can fly but this feels pretty close. With the wind blowing in my hair and the sun shining on my face, I think to myself that this must be what it feels like to be free. I could stay up here forever. I stay in the air for about three minutes, and then Mr. Evans directs the counselors as they carefully let me down. When my feet touch the ground, I run over to the counselors and they all hug me. I feel loved and protected.

I sit by James on the ride back to Wall Doxey and we make a plan for how we will sneak out to see each other after curfew. After the counselors check our cabins, they are awake for about another hour or so but they don't leave their cabins again. Our plan is to meet at our spot at

12 p.m. which should be right when the counselors are sleeping. James asks me if I read the note he gave me so I tell him that I hadn't gotten the chance yet since we have been so busy with retreat activities. For whatever reason, he looks a little relieved when I say this and he tells me to bring it with me when we meet tonight but not to read it until he is with me. He says that he wants to see my reaction. I blush when he says this, and I jokingly nudge him with my elbow and tell him to get over himself. He is so smooth with everything he says and I know he can tell the effect his words have on me.

Later that night after the counselors check the cabins, I am laying in bed with James's note in hand as I eagerly wait for the time to come. Savannah must have sensed my angst or something because she crawls into my bed and asks me what's going on. I tell her about my plan to meet James and she assures me that I won't get caught. She thinks that the only reason Hunter and Lexi got caught is because the counselors already had them on radar since they know they are a couple. Alexander and Steven haven't been caught yet because only a few of us here know about them, and even fewer people know about James and I. Talking to Savannah helps to calm my nerves and it makes the hour fly by. When the time finally comes, Savannah gives me a thumbs up and whispers "you got this" as I sneak out the back door.

I meet James at our spot and we hug for a long time when we first see each other. It is at this moment that I realize I've never actually hugged him before. His arms are around my waist and he holds me tighter the longer we hug. He is so tall that my head only reaches his chest and I can hear his heart beating at a rapid pace. I think he's nervous or maybe he's excited or some combination of the two. His cologne smells warm and sweet with a subtle woodsy undertone,

and all I can think about is how I don't want him to let go. When our hug ends, we sit on the blanket with my hands in his as we talk.

"I've got a question for you," James says.

"Okay, shoot." I say.

"How are you doing? We don't really talk about why we are here and all that so I wanted to check in with you. I care about you a lot and I want to know where your head is," he says.

I knew he was going to ask me about my problems at some point. Normally being asked something like this by someone I am interested in would immediately make me feel anxious but I feel comfortable around James.

"I am doing alright, I guess," I say. "You know how I said that I tried to commit suicide a few weeks ago?"

James leans in closer and I can see the genuine care he has for me in his eyes as he gently squeezes my hands.

"Well, I still struggle with thoughts like that, and Mr. Evans helped me to see that a way I could fight those thoughts is by setting goals for myself. Essentially, the goals will be a way to remind me that there are things to look forward to in my life. It kind of goes along with the whole having faith and believing life can get better focus of this week."

"That makes sense. What have you come up with so far? Maybe I can help you," he says.

"Nothing at all to be honest. I need to come up with something before I have my next session."

James looks up at the stars for a moment, and I can tell that he is thinking. He suggests that I could make my goals for myself by making a bucket list of things I want to do before I die.

Together, he and I come up with a list of twenty things:

20 Things to do Before I Go

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Graduate high school | 11. Learn how to play an instrument |
| 2. Attend my dream college | 12. Adopt three animals |
| 3. Travel to every continent | 13. See the Northern Lights |
| 4. Watch the sunrise | 14. Get married (maybe) |
| 5. Spend the summer in another country | 15. Have kids (if #14 permits) |
| 6. Find a job I love | 16. Go skydiving |
| 7. Go vegetarian for a month (shoutout to James) | 17. Go skinny dipping |
| 8. Do a backflip | 18. Be in a parade |
| 9. Fall in love | 19. Learn how to drive a stickshift |
| 10. Learn a new language | 20. Run a marathon |

James says to me, “Halle, don’t wish your life away. There are a lot of people that would do anything to keep living if they could.” He has this habit of saying little things like that and not unpacking what he means by it or what made him say it. He gives me a Rafiki from *The Lion King* type of vibe.

After we finish the list, we lay down to look at the stars and James fills my ears with sweet little nothings. When I ask him if I can read whatever is in the note he wrote, he says that he wants to change a few things in it and then he will give it back to me. This makes me even more curious about what the note says but I hand the note back to him, and I guess I’ll just have to wait for whenever he fixes whatever needs fixing.

We have been outside for a long time, and I tell James that we should head back soon before day breaks. James smiles and says, “You must’ve already forgotten about number four on your list. We are going to watch the sunrise. It won’t be as beautiful as you but it’ll be a close second.” I blush when he says this. I swear I’m in love with his words.

Just before the sun is about to rise, James asks me if I trust him since that is what this whole week has been about. I tell him yes and he says he wants me to prove it. I ask him how he

expects me to do that and he says with a trust fall. I haven't done a trust fall with someone since I was literally in elementary school. "You are so cheesy," I say jokingly.

James holds out his arms so I turn my back to him and I walk a step or two forward to get into position. "Three.....two.....one.....fall," he says. With that, I lean back and fall straight into his arms. James lifts me back up to my feet and pulls me into him all in one swift motion.

"I know what I want for winning that race," he says.

"Oh really? What would that be?" I ask.

"Kiss me," he says.

And so I do. I love this moment with James. I love this sunrise.

Chapter 6

Soul Searching

Last week felt like a dream. At least, all of the parts involving James felt like a dream. He asked me to be his girlfriend yesterday, so I guess I have a boyfriend now. It feels really weird in the absolute best way to say that. The only people that know right now are James and I but we aren't keeping it a secret or anything like that. I'm just waiting for the right moment to tell my friends and Jabari because I don't want all of that attention on me. I also feel like telling people will put outside pressures on me and the relationship. Not to mention the fact that if the counselors find out, we will have eyes on us just like Hunter and Lexi do. None of that could be true but that is what the cycle of my thoughts looks like.

I never got around to calling my parents last week. I am honestly really nervous about what they will say so I've been putting it off. The new week of the retreat technically doesn't start until we have our first opening session but that isn't until 9:30 a.m. and it is only 8 a.m. right now. Jabari and I made plans last night to meet around this time to go call our parents while we are still in week two. I head over to the guys' cabin to grab Jabari, and I see James smoking outside and getting ready for his morning run. When he sees me, he flashes me the smile that my

heart just can't seem to get enough of, and he walks towards me.

"Well look who it is. It's my girl," he says as he hugs me. Hearing James actually call me his and feeling his warm embrace is definitely something I would love to get used to. I squeeze him tighter and say, "Good morning, babe." *Babe*. I can't believe I just called him that. I guess it isn't too weird for me to say since he and I are dating now but I hope it doesn't freak him out.

My worries are melted away when James pulls away from our hug with an even bigger smile and says, "Oh, so I'm your babe now? I like that." I laugh and jokingly tell him that he works my nerves. James and I talk while he smokes until Jabari comes out of the cabin. I notice a bruise on his arm so I ask him where it came from. He says, "Oh these? I think it's from that trust fall we did last night." I didn't realize that I fell into him that hard so I apologize and kiss his bruises. He says that I didn't hurt him or anything like that. According to him, he just bruises easily. When Jabari finally comes out, James quickly puts out his joint and then heads off on his run.

Jabari and I walk to the main cabin to get our phones from the counselors so we can call our parents. I get ready to press the button to call my dad when my heart rate starts increasing at an alarming rate. I've been anxious all morning, and I've been doing my best to suppress it but I can't ignore it anymore. I clench my chest and close my eyes as my breathing shallows.

"Halle, Halle! Look at me," Jabari says. Jabari grabs my hands and I open my eyes.

"Tell me five things you can see right now," he says.

"I can't do it," I say. Tears start rolling down my face and I look down at my feet. Jabari lets go of one of my hands to wipe my tears and he lifts my chin.

"Yes you can. I've got you. Tell me five things you can see," he says.

“Um, I see trees, grass, clouds, my shoes, and you,” I say.

“Okay, good. Now tell me four things you can touch,” he says.

“I can feel my necklace, my phone, my shirt, and your hand,” I say. I take a deep breath.

“That’s right, I’m right here holding your hand. Tell me three things you can hear,” he says.

“I hear the birds chirping, the wind blowing, and your phone ringing. Don’t you want to answer that?” I ask. In the midst of all my anxiousness, Jabari’s phone had been ringing. He was in the process of calling our parents when my anxiety took over. He hung up on them to come to me and they have been calling ever since.

“I’ll call our folks back in a second, it’s you and me right now. Tell me two things you can smell,” he says.

“I smell the water from the lake and my perfume,” I say as I take another deep breath.

“Last one, tell me one thing you can taste,” he says.

“I can taste my toothpaste,” I say.

“I sure hope that’s what you’re tasting this early in the morning since we haven’t eaten yet,” he says and we laugh. Even in anxious moments like this when I feel like my world is spinning, Jabari can still make me smile. I swear I have the most perfect little brother.

“How did you know how to do that?” I ask. Jabari has never done the anxiety countdown with me before and I am really curious as to where he learned it.

“There was one day a year or so ago when you were having an anxiety attack in your room. I had just gotten home from basketball practice and I heard Maya do it with you to calm you down. I figured that I should learn it just in case I ever needed to do it too.”

Once I have fully calmed down, Jabari and I call our parents. I talk to each of my parents for what feels like the longest twenty minutes of my life. Most of the conversation was filled with only tears and no words. The words that were said consisted almost entirely of my parents apologizing to Jabari and me. As much as I hate my parents feeling like what I did was their fault because it isn't, it feels good to know that I am genuinely being heard. There is no more trying to pretend, on anyone's part, that I am keeping it all together. I can't even begin to describe the emotional release I feel right now from finally being allowed to fall apart. At the end of our conversation, we decide to talk more about everything when my parents come to get us in a few weeks. As hard as that conversation was to have, I'm glad we did it.

By the time Jabari and I finish talking to our parents and returning our phones, we only have fifteen minutes until our first group session of the week begins. I debate skipping breakfast to go find James but a loud protest in my stomach forces me to head towards all of the food. I quickly eat a bagel and some fruit as I wait for everyone else to come in.

Mrs. Young will be leading all of our group sessions this week and she begins by giving us her spiel on what this week will entail. This week is all about soul searching which essentially means that we will be getting to the root of wherever our truth comes from. So for me, I am going on a deep sea dive to find where my anxiety and depression comes from. I can't speak for the other people here with anxiety but this week sounds like it's going to send me all the way down the overthinking rabbit hole.

Mrs. Young tells us that this week will be a little different because we will conduct most of our group sessions split in two different sub groups. In one group there will be Savannah, Abbey, Margo, Steven, Alexander and me. The other group will be Jenna, Aria, Hunter, Lexi,

James, and Jabari. So in one group we have suicidal people with anxiety and depression, and in the other group we have people who basically don't know how they feel about themselves. I know that sounds kind of dark and insensitive of me to just bluntly label our groups like that but that is just how my mind grasps stuff.

Before we break off into our two separate groups, we all go around and share how we are feeling using the feeling wheel. Overall, we are all a big bowl of confusion with a sprinkle of optimism on top. I don't necessarily feel confused but I most certainly feel lost. I am convinced that Mrs. Young can read my mind because she interrupts my muddled thoughts with the reading of this poem by one of her favorite poets:

*You are not lost.
You are not lost.
You are still being led
Right where you need to be
Even in your weariness
Even in your waiting*

-Morgan Harper Nichols

The words echo again and again in my head. I am not lost. *I am not lost.* Right now, these four words are everything.

My group and I head to meet with Mrs. Young while the other group stays with the other counselors to write in their journals. Our group session begins with Mrs. Young asking each of us if we know what a trigger is. We all have a general idea of what a trigger is and what it means to be triggered but Mrs. Young describes it as a psychological stimulus that makes us remember a traumatic experience. Whatever sets us off might not necessarily be frightening or traumatic and could possibly be only indirectly related to what happened. People that struggle with anxiety

often feel the anxiety when they are triggered by something. A way for us to fight back against anxious thoughts is to learn what our triggers are.

I've never experienced anything super traumatic so hearing this is a little disheartening and I feel like I've been left behind on the emotion train. I share my thoughts with the group and Mrs. Young says that our triggers don't have to be from something traumatic. Our triggers can also be memories, experiences, or situations that spark a strong emotional reaction, regardless of our current mood. You see, this makes a lot more sense to me. Now for the big question: How am I supposed to learn what my triggers are? Our assignment for this week is to take a self inventory by focusing on how we are feeling moment by moment throughout the day.

A lot of us in our group are still a little confused on what we are supposed to be monitoring ourselves for so Mrs. Young explains further by telling us one of her triggers. She tells us about how when she was younger, she felt as if she had to work a lot to get her parents attention whether that be from making the house sparkly clean or by cooking the entire family dinner. Because of this, she noticed that in the beginning of her relationship with her husband, she would get mad at him anytime she did something around the house that her husband failed to notice. After doing some self work, Mrs. Young came to realize that her anger was a response to the emotional trigger of feeling unnoticed by her parents as a child. In order to combat this, Mrs. Young has learned to reassess her emotions when she feels triggered and to communicate with her husband about how she is feeling. We all feel more confident in what we are supposed to be looking for now. All I need to do is take notice of when I am feeling anxious and the event that happened right before it.

When our group session ends, we all head back to the main cabin to see what kind of activities are going on. It looks like right now I can either play volleyball on the sand court or I can play card games in the cabin. None of that sounds too appealing to me so Savannah and I decide to go sit by the lake and read our books. I've never had a friend that likes to read as much as me. When I was younger, kids in school used to tease me for reading so much. Ever since then, I mostly only read in the comfort of my home but I don't have to worry about anything like that at this retreat.

These people are all turning into some of the best friends I have ever had and we are only at week three. The more I think about how close I am getting to everyone, the more I begin to worry about what life will be like when I leave this retreat and all of the friends I have made behind. Will they all forget about me? Will we all still talk? And what about James. Damn. I notice that the more I think about this, the more anxious I become. I try to do what Mrs. Young taught us about monitoring our emotions so I pull out my journal to write about how I'm feeling.

Monday, June 7th

Journal entry 11

I feel really anxious. I am trying to keep myself together as much as I can because Sav is right next to me. I don't understand why I am feeling this way. Nothing was even happening other than me thinking about all of the friends I've made here. This doesn't make any sense. Ugh, this is so unfair. I'm trying to take deep breaths as I am writing this but it is barely working. Calm down, Halle. We are okay. We are safe. Let me try to think about this. I've got to trace the root of this feeling. Step 1: what happened right before I felt anxious. I was thinking about my friends. Specifically, I was thinking about what will happen when I

leave this place. Alright, so why did that make me anxious? I don't have an answer for this right now. I guess I'll have to talk to Mr. Evans about it during our one on one session on wednesday. I'm trying to do this thing where I watch the way that I talk to myself so I'm going to look at this as progress. Normally whenever I am feeling anxious, I just suffer through it and I don't pay attention to where the feeling came from. At least in this moment I know that it came from me thinking about leaving my friends. That's got to be a step in the right direction. Savannah hasn't looked up from her book to notice that I'm writing in my journal so I should probably put it away before she notices. I don't feel like telling her about what I'm writing. That's all for now!

-xo Halle

Even though writing in my journal doesn't help me fully figure out why I am feeling anxious, it did help the anxiety to go away so I'll take it. I finish writing in my journal just in the nick of time because Savannah gazes up to look at the water as soon as I have it tucked away in my bag.

"Do you ever wonder if we live in a multiverse?" Savannah asks me.

"Multiverse? Like if there are other universes with other people or beings or whatever in it?" I ask.

"Yeah. Like, I was thinking, what if in another universe, or a lot of universes, really, there are other versions of us. Other Halles and other versions of me. I wonder what they would be doing right now," she says.

"Probably not sitting at a mental health retreat," I say.

“Yeah, probably not. I bet there is a me out there living the dream,” she says.

“You think? What does a life with you living the dream look like.”

Savannah lays on the grass and stares dreamily at the clouds. “In another universe,” she begins, “I’m laying on the beach. My parents are still together and my older brother isn’t addicted to drugs. We are all enjoying each other’s company and our dog is running by the water. Everything is perfect.”

“I didn’t know about your family. I’m sorry to hear that,” I say.

“It’s all good. My parents are happier apart than I ever saw them together and my brother is working on getting clean. My life isn’t all bad. I just know that there is a version of me out there in absolute bliss,” she says. “What about you? What does your version of living the dream look like.”

I let out a long sigh and I say, “In another universe, I don’t wake up every day feeling anxious and my dad isn’t gone all the time working. In another universe, I’m not afraid of meeting new people and I spend more days happy than I do sad,” I say.

Savannah and I must have been deep into our conversation because we don’t even notice when her counselor Doctor Yang walks up to us.

“I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation and if it is okay with the two of you, I would like to share my opinion with you,” Doctor Yang says.

“Yeah, sure Doc. What’s up?” Savannah asks.

“Well Savannah, you brought up this idea of another you being in a state of absolute bliss in a universe separate from our own,” Doctor Yang says. “What if I told you that you could enter that same blissful state right here in this universe?”

“How could I do that if everything isn’t how I want it to be?” Savannah asks.

“Here’s the thing about bliss; bliss doesn’t mean that everything in your life is perfect. Bliss means complete joy. Do you know what happens when you look up the definition of joy?”

Savannah and I both shake our heads to say no so Doctor Yang continues.

“Joy means gladness not based on circumstance. Meaning, no matter what is going on in the world around you, you have chosen to be joyful. That might not mean you are always happy. Joy is something that can’t be taken away from you. Life will never be perfect. Even if all of your problems in this life are gone in another universe, there will just be something else you are dealing with. I don’t say that to discourage you. I just want both of you to understand that you can have the things you want in this life. You can find your bliss right where you are.”

“Thanks Doc. I get what you’re saying. I just wish I knew how to find that blissful state,”

Savannah says.

“Hold on to that thought and bring it back up during the group session next week. That’ll go hand in hand with our focus for next week.”

“Will do Doc.”

Savannah and I stay by the lake and read until the sun starts to go down. Once it starts getting dark, we head back to the main cabin to meet up with the rest of our crew for dinner. I am stuffing my face with mashed potatoes and I am entirely consumed with this idea of living in bliss.

I continue to think about our conversation with Doctor Yang well into the night and it is one of the first things on my mind when I wake up in the morning. Mr. Evans tells me that when

thoughts are consuming my mind, I should write them down to release them. I pull out my journal and write about all of the things troubling me.

I promised James that I would run the full three miles with him this morning if he would finally give me the note that he wrote. I hold up my end of the bargain and run the three miles but when I ask James for the note, he says that I have to wait until tonight. We only sneak out every other night so we don't get caught and tonight is one of those nights. As eager as I am to read whatever this letter says, I secretly like that James is making me wait. He has this mysterious energy to him even though he's an open book when it comes to asking him questions.

My one-on-one session with Mr. Evans isn't set to be until tomorrow but I really need to talk to him today. I need him to help me bring some form of sense to what my trigger could mean. I also really need to hear his take on finding this bliss on earth that Doctor Yang says is possible for me. I find Mr. Evans in the main cabin talking to the other counselors. I'm a little nervous to walk up to all of them to pull him aside but I know they won't judge me. Mr. Evans asks me if everything is alright as I approach him so I tell him that I'm fine. I just really really need to talk. We walk to his office and I lay on his couch as everyone in a stereotypical counselor session on television would do and I begin to pour out my heart.

I begin to tell him about all of the anxiety I felt yesterday from thinking about leaving all of my friends here. This somehow leads to us talking directly about my social anxiety and where the root of that problem could stem from. I tell him that the idea of walking in a room full of people alone makes me feel anxious so he asks me if I fear that no one will talk to me. That made me feel a little called out because my answer is yes. He then asks me why I believe no one would talk to me. Well, for that I have no answer. He asks me if it could stem from a fear of rejection

and this gets me thinking. I ponder on this question for a while and then I tell him that I think it could. Just yesterday I was thinking about how I was teased for reading when I was younger. It made me feel isolated and unaccepted. Now that I think about it, that has kept me from freely expressing myself and interacting with others.

Mr. Evans helps me to unpack this even further and essentially, I felt anxious when thinking about losing my friends because I fear of returning back to a state of not being accepted. At this retreat, I have had the amazing opportunity to meet beautifully bent but not broken people just like me. The thought of losing them reminded me of a time when I had no friends. Maya moving away was another situation where I felt I was alone again so thinking about that just triggered all of those negative emotions.

Learning that one of my triggers revolves around feeling like I won't be accepted or that I'll be alone means everything to me. I ask Mr. Evans how I can work on this trigger and he tells me that I need to be in control of my thoughts. Basically, each time I have an anxious thought that says I'm alone, or I won't be accepted, or that I am unworthy, I need to challenge that thought by telling myself affirmations. I need to remind myself that I don't need to worry about losing the people I have close to me and that I am capable of making connections. Mr. Evans walks me through an exercise to combat negative thoughts and it looks like this:

I am	Even if
whole growing healing evolving moving on resilient choosing me	I feel alone I make mistakes some things still hurt people around me don't understand I have to let go in order to find peace I feel weak life gets hard

If I would've known that therapy and counseling was going to be like this, I would've asked for help a long, long time ago. I allow that thought to come and go because another thing I am trying to work on is living in the present moment. I spend so much time worrying about the future so Mr. Evans wants me to try to, as he likes to call it, be where my feet are. I know that sounds a little weird but it just means to focus on the now. I rip the page with the exercise on it from my journal and fold it so I can put it in my pocket. I want to keep it close by.

When night time finally comes around, I make my way to go meet James at our spot. I almost get caught by one of the counselors as I am passing the boy's cabin but Alexander and Steven help cover for me. They are in the process of sneaking out too so when Mr. Thompson asks us what we are all up to, we make up a story about needing to find where Alexander dropped his inhaler in the woods. Alexander doesn't really have asthma and I am pretty sure that Mr. Thompson is about to call our bluff. Surprisingly, Mr. Thompson just shakes his head in amusement and tells us not to stay out too late.

I finally make it to James and I feel immediately at ease. We spend a little time talking about our day and checking in with each other about all the mental health stuff. I open up to him about my fear of losing him when we return to the real world and he reassures me with the most tender of kisses.

"So where's this letter you've been keeping from me?" I ask.

James laughs and says, "I haven't been keeping it from you; I've been perfecting it. Only the best for you, right?"

I blush when he says this and I say, "Well hand it over then. We don't have all night."

James reaches into his back pocket for the note and then places it in my hand. I start to open it so I can read it but then I stop and hand it back to him.

“Read it to me,” I say.

“As you wish. It’s a poem that I wrote for you,” he says.

James places the letter back in his pocket. I ask him how he expects to read me the letter if he doesn’t have it open and he smirks.

“I know the words girl. The words have been in my head ever since I first laid eyes on you,” he says.

James wraps my arms around his neck and then he wraps his arms around my waist. In the most smooth, soulful, sultry voice I have ever heard, he stares into my eyes and speaks these words over me:

*Within you,
Sweet girl, I see
A young woman on the cusp of so much more.
You, my love, are so much more.*

*You are the light in the darkness.
Even when clouds of doubt fog your every thought,
And you wonder if you will ever come out of the hell within your mind,
There is a safe space you can find
Right inside of you.*

*I once heard a preacher talking about the meaning of the word hallelujah.
What is the meaning you ask?
Extreme light exploding in extreme darkness.
I almost think it’s funny how the stars aligned to bring forth you.
It is no coincidence that your name is within the word.
Halle, my hallelujah.*

*Just like the word hallelujah has the power
To bring pure light in absolute darkness,*

*You have the power
To do the same.*

*If only you could see you through my eyes
You'd see a young woman full of strength
A young woman not afraid to be soft
A young woman who could bring a kingdom to its knees
Just from the sound of her name*

*So I ask of you,
Do not be afraid of all that you are.
Be the peace, be the chaos
Be the sorrow, be the joy*

I am at an absolute loss for words. This poem. This boy. This love. I touch my hand to my cheek to wipe away my tears. I'm not sad or anything like that. I'm just entirely overwhelmed in the most wonderful of ways. Never in my life have I had someone speak to me with such passion, such understanding, such support, such love.

James and I spend a few more perfect moments together, and then we slowly head back to our cabins. I get ready to kiss James goodbye when I remember that he still needs to give me the actual letter. He hands me the letter, winks at me, and then walks into the guy's cabin. On this night, I sleep in bliss.

It is finally Thursday again and I am really excited to see what kind of field trip the counselors have in store for us today. Savannah and I were up late last night planning a surprise for Alexander. His birthday is tomorrow so our whole crew is going to sneak out tonight to celebrate. We still need to figure out the logistics of how we are going to make six people go unnoticed but that sounds like a problem for when the actual time comes.

Once everyone at the retreat has eaten breakfast, we all load the busses to see where our next adventure awaits. The counselors won't tell us where we are going, and we are blindfolded as we enter the bus so we all sit in anticipation of what will happen next. We are on the bus for what feels like forever and a day when the counselors finally tell us to remove our blindfolds.

I remove the blindfold to see that we have arrived at a trampoline park. I'm not sure why we had to be blindfolded for this but the counselors probably just want to make our day more exciting. Admittedly, it's working. Last week, our field trip kind of tied in with our theme of the week but I don't see what a trampoline park has to do with soul searching. I ask Mr. Evans what lesson we are supposed to get out of coming to a trampoline park and he tells me that we are just here to have a good time. He smiles in a way as he says this that lets me know that the lesson will reveal itself. Nonetheless, I haven't been to a trampoline park since I was a little kid and I'm stoked.

I put on the special trampoline socks and head straight to the jousting area. Jabari is going down. When we were younger, this was always our favorite part of trampoline parks because we could fight without getting in trouble by our parents. Jabari is a hell of a lot bigger than he was when we were younger so he might be stronger than me now but I think I can take him. We have a rule that whoever gets to the jousting area first gets to throw the first hit so we both are running there as fast as we can. It looks like all of this running with James has finally actually done me some good because I beat Jabari to the jousting ledge with seconds to spare. Jabari and I take jabs at each other, and with every hit, I am further engrossed in this blissful childlike experience.

I look around the trampoline park and the view is so great. Everyone is smiling bigger and laughing harder than I've seen them do in the past three weeks we've been here. There is no

worrying about the troubles of this world or what is coming next. Right now, we have all returned to a state of innocent joy. We all play for hours jumping around, playing games, being reckless, being young. As we are playing, James motions me over to the large trampoline with the foam pit.

“Are you ready to cross off number eight of your twenty things?” James asks me.

“Ha, yeah right. If I tried to do a backflip, I’d probably break my back,” I say.

“Come on, girl. Don’t you know I’d never let you get hurt by now. We are all big kids today.

Kids can do anything because they just go for it. You got this,” he says.

James goes through the motions of teaching me how to do a backflip and before I know it, I’m at the top of a ledge and he’s cheering me on to jump. I go over his instructions again in my head. All I have to do is jump up, hug my knees to my chest, and roll backwards. Sounds simple enough, right? Wrong. I have taken over fifteen jumps but I still haven’t gotten it yet. I’m starting to get a little frustrated and James must be able to tell because he comes over to tell me to relax. I tell him that I’ve been trying really hard but I just can’t seem to get it. “See, that’s the problem. You are trying way too hard. Try easy,” he says. I take a deep breath and I prepare to try the jump again. I completely relax and allow my mind to go blank as a jump. Next thing I know, I’ve landed in the foam pit and everyone is clapping for me. I actually did it!

I am so excited about doing a backflip that I don’t notice when James sits down and starts looking faint. I walk over to him and ask him what’s going on. He says that all of the jumping has made him feel a little light headed. I touch the back of my hand to his forehead. “James you are burning up,” I say. He sighs and says, “I’m alright. I’ll just go grab some medicine from

Chelsea.” James spends the rest of our time at the trampoline park sitting down but his smile never fades.

At the end of the day, we all load back on the bus, and Mrs. Young gives us a little spiel on what we just did. I knew there was going to be a lesson. What I get from what she says is that the entire point of today was to experience childlike joy. She says, “The goal for this week was for you all to do a little soul searching. Depending on what group you are in, each of you took a different approach to try to figure out what events lead you to where you are today. Regardless of the approach your counselor walked you through, you essentially had to take a dive into your childhood. That is why today, we wanted to show you how to get to the roots of yourself from a new perspective. I saw all of you running and playing carelessly today which is exactly what we wanted for you all. You were all able to experience a childlike state full of happiness and maybe you were even able to feel a sense of freedom. This week and today is all about actively finding yourself. It is about finding things that once gave you joy and looking back at your life to see where things shifted. Soul searching is a lifelong process full of a lot of work and at times it can feel overwhelming. Remember that slow and steady will win this race. I overheard James say something to Halle as he was teaching her how to do a backflip that I want each of you to hear as well. He told her to try easy. I want each of you to carry that with you. Try easy. Be gentle with yourselves as you go through this work.”

On the bus ride back home, Savannah and I come up with a plan for all of our crew to sneak out tonight. The plan is for each of us to stuff our beds to look like we are still there. It’s the oldest trick in the book but hopefully it’ll keep our cover from being blown. We aren’t worried about any of the other retreat members telling on us because we are all pretty cool with

each other and no one likes a snitch. We mostly need a little insurance just in case the counselors do a random check throughout the night. The other night one of the counselors came by to do a random check because they thought Hunter and Lexi were out again. They definitely were out but Abbey helped cover for Lexi and Jabari helped cover for Hunter.

When we make it back to the retreat, we are all given thirty minutes with our phones so we can talk to our parents. At the end of next week, all of our parents are coming back up here to participate in a few sessions before they take us home for our week off so we have to ask them to get here by Friday morning. Jabari and I catch our parents up on everything that has been going on with us and I even tell my mom a little about James. She was shocked that I've actually been giving a boy my attention and I'm even more shocked that I told her at all. That is normally one of the last things I would tell my parents about but ever since faith week last week, I feel a little more comfortable telling them stuff.

My mom tells me all about the new drama surrounding the Fourth of July celebration Ms. Ronda is supposed to be having. Apparently, Ms. Ronda and one of the sisters of the church got in a fight over who is cooking the potato salad. All I know is, I've tasted my mom's potato salad and no one at that church can make a potato salad even half as good as hers. The fight was resolved with Pastor Mike appointing my mom with the duty of making the potato salad. I know my stomach will be grateful and honestly, so will everyone else's.

I still have ten minutes left until I have to turn my phone back in so I spend the rest of the time diving into all of my social media accounts. I've essentially been off the grid for three weeks now and I swear so much has happened in the cyber world. Now that I am all caught up on what couples are still together at my school and all the celebrity drama of Hollywood, I can

give my phone back in peace. I walk back to the counselors office and turn my phone back in. Not having a phone hasn't been all that bad but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't ready to have it back full time.

At dinner, Savannah and I make sure that all of our plans to sneak out tonight are all in place. It was kind of hard to talk about it without Alexander hearing anything but we made it happen. He thinks that he and Steven are going to sneak out like they do any other night. Savannah and I were able to sneak a few extra snacks throughout the week for us to bring tonight. The boys are supposed to be bringing blankets and a speaker but we'll see what happens with that.

When the time comes, Savannah and I stuff our beds and quietly sneak out the cabin. As soon as we are out the back door, I see a duffle bag with my name on it. My heart just about sinks all the way to my ass when I see it. I don't know what is in the bag but this has horror movie written all over it. I muster up the courage to open the bag and I can't believe what I see. In the bag, there are battery powered hanging lights, cupcakes, sodas, a few card games, and a note. I open the note to see that it is from Mr. Evans. It reads, "I was a teenager once too. Tell Alexander I said happy birthday." Wow, I quite literally have the coolest counselor ever. I don't know how Mr. Evans knew we would sneak out but I do vaguely remember telling him that we would throw him a surprise party at some point, whoops. Savannah and I laugh the shock of the situation away and we giddily run to set everything up.

James and Jabari are already at our spot, and they look so confused when they see Savannah and I waltzing up with this huge duffle bag. "What is all that?" Jabari asks. "Just a few things from the *best* counselor at this Finding Light retreat," Savannah says as she winks at me.

Everyone has made it out except Steven and Alexander. We all hide behind the trees, and we are on the lookout for when we see them approaching. I hear Alexander's infectious laughter minutes before I can ever see him so I warn the others that they are getting close. Alexander is almost to me so we all jump out and scream, "happy birthday!" "Jesus Christ!" exclaims Alexander. "You guys almost gave me a literal heart attack!" We all laugh and we fall into the sweet euphoria that we find in each other's company.

We have been playing card games and stuffing ourselves with cupcakes for a while when Alexander suggests that we all play Truth or Dare. Now the real party is going to start. I haven't played Truth or Dare since I was in middle school and I am really excited to play it out here in the woods. As soon as Alexander brings it up, I immediately start planning all of the dares I'm going to tell them to do.

We've been playing the game for about ten minutes and so far Jabari has eaten leaves, Savannah has smelled Alexander's armpit, and Steven has to act like a chicken until it is his turn again. Alexander asks me if I pick truth or dare and I tell him dare.

"I dare you to pick someone to go jump in the lake," he says.

"You are crazy no one is going to want to do that. They'll get all wet," I say.

"I'll do it if you do it with me," James says to me.

"Well I'm not the type to back down from a dare. Let's do it."

James and I walk over to the lake and we start taking off our shoes.

"Wait, this is the perfect opportunity," he says.

"What are you talking about? The perfect opportunity for what?" I ask.

"For number seventeen on your list of course," he says.

I am really confused about what he means because I don't remember what seventeen is. After about twenty seconds the realization hits me. Skinny dipping.

"Are you serious? You want to right now?" I ask.

"Only if you are comfortable with it of course. I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do," he says.

"If I do it, will you do it too?" I ask.

"Of course. I wouldn't want you to have all the fun without me. Besides, this way, we will have dry clothes to put on. It's a win win."

James winks at me and we start taking off our clothes. We hold hands and we start running towards the water. After the count of three, we jump into the water. The water is the perfect temperature and I'm so happy that I get to do this with James. We play and swim in the water until our hands start to get wrinkly. Before we get out, James pulls me close to him and we start kissing. I've never been close to a boy in this way and it feels so good to be held by him. After we are done, we get out, put our clothes back on, and head to meet back up with the rest of the party.

"Y'all have been gone for like twenty minutes. What were y'all doing? We thought somebody drowned or something," Savannah says.

"Just crossing something off a list," I say.

James and I laugh, and we all stay out until the sun starts peaking out. We all successfully sneak back into our cabins without a hitch.

Chapter 7

Willingness

Out of all the weeks we have had here at camp, this is the week I have been looking forward to the most. We have spent a lot of time figuring out exactly what our issues are and now it is finally time for us to learn some practical, logistical ways to work on our mental health. Mr. Evans told me that this week is sort of like a really big self care week and I am really hoping that one of these activities will involve a facial.

Last night I promised Jabari that I would let him teach me how to play basketball so I head over to the guy's cabin after my morning run with James to get him. Jabari isn't in the cabin when I get there so I go to the basketball court where I find him already playing with Steven. I watch their movements and I try to implant them in my memory. I'm normally a visual learner but I'm sure learning is different when you're trying to play an actual sport. Steven and Jabari finish their game of one on one, and I walk on the court to prepare for my lesson.

Jabari has been trying to teach me how to dribble while moving for the past thirty minutes now. I either drop the ball and it gets away from me or I end up getting a foul for traveling. I honestly really suck at this but I love spending the quality time with my brother.

Jabari and I are running up and down the court when suddenly Jabari drops the ball and trips.

I've never seen anything like that happen to Jabari before while he's playing. Something must have distracted him. I help him up and I look around to see what has caught his gaze. Walking past the basketball court is no other than Jenna.

"Oh, I see why you fell now. You have a crush!" I say to Jabari.

"Girl please. I have no idea what you are talking about," Jabari says.

"Yeah, right. You are one of the best basketball players I know and you just let me cross you. I can barely even play. You messed up when you saw her," I tease.

"Okay, okay. You got me. Just don't say anything to anyone alright. She doesn't know that I like her," he says.

"How did this even happen? I didn't know that y'all even had conversations," I say.

"It happened last week when she and I were in the same group. We had to do a lot of exercises together so we talked a lot. She's cool people," he says.

"Well, I think you should go for it. You are so funny, talented, and nice. You're a total catch," I say.

"I'm just worried about what our parents would say," he says.

"Why? What do you mean?" I ask.

"I mean I can't come home with a white girl," he says.

"Boy, bye. Our parents aren't even like that. Besides, Jenna is mixed with Hispanic," I say.

"They may have never said anything to you but I've heard them say many times how they are excited for us to grow up one day and raise *Black* families. They may not trip over it to my face but still," he says.

“I can one-hundred percent guarantee that our parents are more concerned about the actual love and happiness we have than the color of their skin,” I say.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. But if our parents don’t trip over it, you know some of those folks from church will,” he says.

“Regardless of all of that, I still say you should go for it,” I say.

“Alright, maybe I will,” he says.

After Jabari is done schooling me in the world of basketball, I school him in the world of attracting women.

When it is time for the main group session for the week, my whole crew rounds up so we can head to the session together. The first thing I notice is that the room isn’t set up in the normal large circle of chairs. Today, there are no chairs and there are yoga mats with a large round pillow on it. It looks like we could either be getting ready to exercise or take a large group nap like we did in kindergarten. I secretly hope that we will be taking a nap because playing ball with Jabari really wore me out.

We begin the session by going over how everyone is feeling using the feeling wheel. Today, we are all a mix of optimistic, content, hopeful, and inspired with just a sprinkle of anxious. I must say, how we are all doing today is miles ahead of where our mental state was a few weeks ago.

Mr. Thompson is leading the majority of our group sessions this week, and according to Alexander, he’s the best counselor ever so I’m ready to see how this will go. Mr. Thompson stands up to give the opening speech on what we are focusing on this week. He says, “I just want to start by saying congratulations to everyone for making it to week four of this retreat. You have

all made so much progress, and I am so thankful for the opportunity to continue to walk beside each of you throughout your journeys. We've spent the last few weeks ripping ourselves open and now we are going to look at methods to help us keep it together. This week is all about being willing and what that means is for each of us to be in charge of our own mental health. Next week, you are all going home and back into the real world. It may be harder to focus on your mental health when you're away from us but it is of absolute necessity that you put yourselves first. This week, we will practice different methods of self care such as yoga, meditation, more journaling, setting boundaries, and finding things that bring us peace. We will also form a plan about what each of you will practice when you are home in order to keep your mental health at the forefront such as possibly finding a counselor you can talk to in your hometown. Let's get to work."

Apparently, Mr. Thompson is also a certified yoga instructor. When you first look at him, you wouldn't necessarily think that he is into yoga but as soon as you hear him talk about it, you can certainly tell that he is a major yogi. As part of our willingness week, we will be doing a lot of yoga sessions to help us relax and to, as Mr. Thompson calls it, *connect with our inner selves*. Yoga is obviously not for everyone, and most of the boys, with the exception of Alexander, don't look too excited about it. The expression on a lot of the guy's faces is obvious so Mr. Thompson asks all of us to keep an open mind.

Now that we kind of know what the purpose of the yoga is, we begin with a group meditation. I've never meditated at all and I honestly don't know how. In fact, I barely know what meditation is. I always just imagine a bald-headed monk sitting still and saying "om" over and over again. Mr. Evans tells us that the goal of meditation is for us to learn how to focus and

redirect our thoughts. You know how sometimes you'll be thinking and then an unwanted or negative thought will pop up in your head? Yeah, well meditation will teach us how to be in control of our thoughts and help us push negative thoughts away. Mr. Evans tells us that meditations can be formed to center around a mantra, or a certain purpose such as sleeping, or for any emotion under the sun. Towards the end of this week, we are going to practice meditating in complete silence but today we will start with being guided by Mr. Evans.

Mr. Evans instructs us to sit on the pillows in an easy seated position. We should be sitting up straight but not too straight as to make us comfortable. I close my eyes and try to focus. "Slowly begin to draw attention to your breath," he says. "Not necessarily changing anything about how you're breathing just yet, just notice how it feels to breathe." As soon as he says this I notice that I am taking rather shallow breaths so I start to breathe a little slower and deeper. "Begin to clear your mind of all thoughts and only focus on your breath and the sound of my voice," he says. I'll be honest, Mr. Evans talks in a voice that could easily put a baby to sleep so it's easy to focus on what he is saying. As we are being guided through meditation, my mind begins to wander a few times. I find myself thinking about little things like how long we've been sitting here, what we are doing after this, how I want a snack, how my nose itches, and how good James looks in his yellow sweatshirt. Mr. Evans keeps telling us to "be right here" but this is so hard.

I'm trying not to get down on myself for letting my mind wander but now my thoughts are filled with how I'm no good at this. Pause. The whole goal of this meditating thing is to not think and to push negative thoughts away. I empty my mind and return to focusing on my breathing. I am feeling calmer and more at ease now. Before I know it, ten more minutes have

gone by and Mr. Evans tells us to slowly open our eyes. For a second there, I had completely forgotten where I was because I was so relaxed but now I'm becoming aware of my surroundings again.

Our peaceful meditation ends and now it is time for us to talk about how we think it went. I'm glad I'm not alone in the fact that my mind kept wandering because that is a common theme that everyone else is saying they were struggling with. This causes Mr. Evans to talk about how we are practicing mindfulness. Meaning that even though we may not have been able to keep our thoughts away the entire time, the goal is to acknowledge those thoughts and then allow them to pass by not attaching to them. I know that all sounds a little hippie-dippy but it makes a lot of sense. I'm feeling more encouraged now because Mr. Evans says that mindfulness and meditation is a skill that has to be practiced so we shouldn't be hard on ourselves for our wandering minds.

We spend the rest of the day practicing different mindfulness techniques. There is one exercise that I think is particularly weird but I like it by the end. Each of us is given a handful of raisins, and I *hate* raisins. I've always thought they looked like big boogers. There's something about the wrinkliness and the texture that I just can't jive with.

Mr. Evans asks us to imagine that we have never seen a raisin before so I initially begin with trying to remove all of my preconceived notions about how absolutely disgusting these little booger balls are. Next, he asks us to pay attention to how the raisin looks. The raisins are a light reddish color that almost looks translucent but not quite, check. We are then asked to notice how the raisin feels. The raisins feel very wrinkly, but then again, they have a strange smoothness to them. Okay, cool. Let's see what's next. After that, Mr. Evans asks us to notice how our skin

feels as we manipulate the raisins. This one is a little hard for me but I guess if I have to describe it as one thing, it feels very uncomfy. Like I said, it's a texture thing for me. We are then prompted to notice how the raisins smell and taste. I will smell the raisins but I'm sure as hell not going to eat them. I just can't. Ugh, everyone else is tasting the raisins and being a good sport so I suck it up and I eat one raisin. Yep, just like I thought. They are disgusting. To me, they taste like nastiness mixed with even more nastiness.

What I like about this exercise is that for the few moments that we spend noticing the raisin, all of the other clutter in my mind goes away. It's like, for the first time, I have a hands on experience with what it feels like to "be right here" as everyone keeps calling it. I've never had to pay so much attention to something I often never think about. I still don't like raisins but I appreciate them a little more.

Yesterday was all about meditation and mindfulness but today we are getting more into the physical aspects of self care. In other words, it's actual yoga time. I make myself comfy on the yoga mat next to James but I'm starting to think this was a bad idea. When I'm by James, he has my undivided attention. It'll be hard to be present throughout this with him right next to me but I have to try.

Mr. Evans begins to call out the postures and he does them along with us. I'm a little uncoordinated at first but everyone else is at about the same level as me. The only person that is doing almost as well as Mr. Evans is Lexi. She already knows how to have fluid and graceful movements from all of her figure skating.

There are a few times where we all pause to just watch Mr. Evans because he is doing cool stuff my body couldn't begin to try to imitate. It turns out that I'm stronger than I thought

because I learn how to do crow pose by the end of the session. All of the boys can do it now too which is probably why they are looking more into this whole yoga thing. The best part of our practice is hands down the ending. We get in this pose called dead man's pose which is essentially just laying on your back with your eyes closed. Mr. Evan's voice is so soothing that he talks me right to sleep.

Over the course of the next two days, we do a lot more meditating and we take a few more basic yoga classes led by Mr. Evans. I'm starting to think that yoga just might be my new thing. I'm not the most flexible person but it feels so good to stretch and just focus on me for those few moments. James isn't as distracting as I thought he would be. In fact, I find that his presence gives me extra comfort. A lot of the guys are warming up to yoga, too. In fact, Hunter and Jabari ask Mr. Evans if we can include yoga into our everyday activities. Mr. Evans is so happy that they are getting something out of it that he immediately agrees.

All of the parents will be here in two days and the closer that date gets, the more anxious I feel. Sure, my parents listen to me more, and they know my truth and all of that, however, that has all been over the phone. Having to talk to my family in person about what has been going on with me is a whole other story. Even though I have admitted what I did, or rather what I tried to do, I still have yet to say why I did it. I'm not sure there's even an answer to that. It was honestly a combination of a million tiny things that just built up inside of me. I just know that when I have that group therapy session with my parents, the main question they are going to ask is why I did it. Thinking about all of this is starting to get to me so I take a walk around the lake to clear my mind.

I have been walking around the lake for about fifteen minutes when I notice that I hear something that sounds like someone crying. I look around and I don't see anything at first but then I see a girl sitting by a tree hugging her knees to her chest while she rocks back and forth. I slowly begin to approach the girl and I can now recognize her. It's Abbey. I've never actually had a one on one conversation with Abbey, and I'm normally not the type of person to talk to someone that I usually don't. My whole social anxiety thing usually stops me. For whatever reason, I feel compelled to talk to her so I keep walking towards her.

"Hey Abbey. What's going on? Are you okay?" I ask.

"You wouldn't understand," Abbey says through her tears. "No one ever understands."

Abbey is sobbing uncontrollably and shaking. I'm not sure what to do. The only person I've ever seen have an anxiety attack like this is me. Actually, I know exactly what to do. I say a simple phrase, "Breathe with me." Abbey and I begin to take a few deep breaths, and I sit down beside her. After she has stopped shaking, I walk her through the blast anxiety countdown. Once she is fully grounded, I ask her again to tell me what's going on.

Abbey tells me that when she called her parents earlier today, they were asking her if she had been working on her summer reading assignment for school during her free time. She brought the books with her to the retreat but she has been so caught up in everything going on that she has never cracked one book open. Right now, Abbey is in the running to be valedictorian but it is a close race between her and another student so every single assignment matters. The poor girl just feels really overwhelmed and she has a lot of pressure on her. I definitely understand how she feels. Since I am on track to be valedictorian for my own class, I understand, more than anyone else, what it's like to feel like people are coming for your spot.

I tell her about how Savannah and I read together almost every day and that she is welcome to join us if she'd like. It can be hard to complete tasks sometimes when you are feeling anxious so having someone there to support you and hold you accountable is everything. She agrees to start reading with us and thanks me for calming her down.

Abbey and I talk for an entire hour after that. I originally thought that the only thing she and I had in common was that we both struggle with anxiety but we are so much more than that. Not only do we both love the stars, we also are both obsessed with any and all movies. Since Abbey is from Biloxi and I'm from Jackson, we probably won't be able to see each other that often but we plan to have FaceTime movie nights at least once every two weeks when this is all over. Later tonight, we plan to stargaze for hours. I've never had someone that loves the stars as much as me so I feel thankful that I have found a friend in Abbey.

Today is the day. My parents should be arriving within the next few hours. I feel a common mixture of excitement and anxiousness but I'm mostly excited. I haven't gotten a hug from my dad in four weeks so I just know when I finally get to hug him, it'll be epic. I get dressed for my morning run with James and head out to go meet him. We run the first mile and then we start walking so we can talk.

"Are you going to let me meet your dad?" James asks.

"I guess it depends. Are you going to let me meet your mom?" I ask.

"Of course. I've told my folks all about you. They are looking forward to meeting you," he says.

"Well, there you go. There's your answer," I say.

"So....yes?" he asks.

I laugh and say, “Duh, James. I told my mom about you last week. It’s kind of a big deal. I’ve never let a boy meet my parents before.”

“Oh word? Well I’m honored to be the first,” he says.

I blush and say, “How are you so smooth with your words like that?”

He shrugs his shoulders and says, “I don’t know. I just talk. I guess I’m just good like that.”

I playfully push him and then we continue our run.

I go look for Jabari and I find him exactly where I thought he’d be. He’s playing basketball with Steven. James came with me to look for him so we all decide to play a game of two on two. Even though Jabari has been teaching me how to play, I still kind of suck at it. Luckily, Jabari is good enough to carry our team. By the end of the game, I am drenched in sweat, and Jabari and I pull out a win against James and Steven.

Before the game, we agreed that the losing team has to jump in the lake so we all head there to watch Steven and James jump in. James and Steven run towards the water, and do a large cannonball as they dive in. Water splashes everywhere. As James is coming out of the water, he takes his shirt off to wring out the water. Boy oh boy, let me tell you, his abs look even better than when I saw them the first time.

I head back to the cabins to take a shower. Once I am dressed, Jabari and I meet back up to go find our parents. They should have arrived by now so we go check the main cabin. We walk into the cabin to find all of the parents talking with each of our counselors. I don’t realize how much I missed my parents until they are standing right in front of me. When my dad spots me, he says, “There’s my girl!” I run up to him and he embraces me in a warm hug that could

melt even the coldest of hearts. I hug my mother next and it is as if all the anxiety I felt about my parents coming disappears at the very moment her skin meets mine.

I originally thought that the group counseling session would be my brother, my parents and I but Mr. Evans just told me that I will have my own session with my parents and that Jabari will have his own session with our parents and his counselor. I guess that makes sense considering Mr. Evans can't really speak on how Jabari has been doing because he isn't his counselor. I feel a little more nervous now because I wanted Jabari there with me so we could support each other.

As my parents and I head into the session with my counselor, thoughts pop up in my head about my parents like *they won't understand, they won't listen, and this isn't going to work*. I know this is just my anxiety talking trying to protect me from being hurt. I combat these thoughts with positive affirmations. *My parents love me and are here to support me. My parents care about me and they will listen to me*. As soon as I speak these words over myself, I feel at ease.

During the session, I finally pour my heart out to my parents and it feels so good. I tell them all about the situations that make me feel anxious and how I've been feeling depressed. They listen with understanding and compassion. My dad shares with us how when he was younger, he also struggled with suicidal thoughts and depression. This is the last thing I expect for my father to say. He is one of the calmest, happiest people I know. My father says that if it weren't for his family and friends supporting him, he wouldn't be where he is today. My mom also shares that she sometimes struggles with anxiety but that when she was younger, her parents would basically tell her to suck it up. When my mom says this, it makes a lot more sense why

she has a hard time listening to Jabari and I. My mom says that she is going to actively work to not suppress her or Jabari's and my feelings.

By the end of our hour and a half session, my parents and I are on the same page for the first time in forever. I know that I can talk to them about my mental health and that they will get me the help that I need. We create a plan for me to see a counselor at least once every two weeks or more depending on how I am feeling when we return to life outside of this retreat. My parents thank Mr. Evans for everything he has done for me and then we head out.

Before my parents go into their session with Jabari and his counselor, I tell them that there is someone I want them to meet. I'm a little nervous about them meeting James but he is so wonderful that I am certain that they will love him just as much as I do. Wait. Did I really just think that? *I love him*. I probably won't actually tell James that anytime soon because first of all, I'm too scared and second of all, I refuse to be the person that says it first. Any teen magazine will tell you that the boy has to say it first. That's just the way things go.

I take my parents to meet James and the initial meeting goes without a hitch. In fact, my parents invite him to come to the Fourth of July celebration with us next week. Don't get me wrong though, my dad definitely spent ten minutes grilling the poor guy and saying all the normal "if you hurt my daughter, I'll kill you" type stuff that dads like to say to their daughter's boyfriends. Once my parents head into their meeting with Jabari, I assure James that my dad was just kidding and that he's just trying to protect me. James tells me that he wasn't scared or anything and that he can tell he and my father will get along just fine.

At the end of the week, I pack up a few of my things for the week away from the retreat. As excited as I am for a small break from all of this, it's going to suck not seeing James and my

friends every single day. Luckily, James and my friends will be nearby so I'm sure we will see each other at least a few times before we all come back. After I get my phone back, I say goodbye to everyone and go to help my parents load the car. Here's to the next week of trying to maintain everything I've learned at this retreat. Here goes nothing.

Chapter 8

Maintaining

Being back home feels really weird. I mean, don't get me wrong, I like it. It's just really different. For the past few weeks, I've been at a retreat where all I had to do was work on me. Now I'm back home for a week and it feels like my whole world is shifting again. I secretly hope this week goes by quickly because I miss my friends. Mostly, I miss James.

I look around my room and I almost feel like I am right back to where I was five weeks ago. Everything is exactly the same as the day I left. The sweatshirt I forgot to pick up is still on the ground by the hamper, my half eaten bag of Cheez-its is still on my bedside table, and my fish is, thankfully, still living. Luckily for me, there is something a lot different. Me.

I didn't get the chance to ask Jabari how his session with our parents was before we left the retreat so I head into his room to ask him what happened. When we were at the retreat, we were up everyday and doing something by 8 a.m. so I've been awake for a while. I should've known that Jabari was going to take this week-long break to sleep because when I walk in his room, he's still completely knocked out. I desperately want to know what happened because he was quiet the entire drive home and that isn't like him.

Have you ever heard the phrase “curiosity killed the cat”? Well, if you haven’t, it is basically another way to say mind your business or to stay in your own lane. I am reminded of this phrase when I try to wake Jabari and ask him what is going on. I shake him and tell him to wake up.

“Wake up Jabari!” I say. “I need to talk to you.”

Through a groggy, muffled voice, Jabari says, “What is it Halle? I’m trying to sleep?”

“What happened at your session with our folks?” I ask.

Jabari rolls over, facing his back towards me and says, “Go away. I don’t want to talk right now.”

A little hurt by his reaction, I ask again. “Please Jabari. Just talk to me. What happened?”

“I said go away!” he yells.

Jabari has never spoken to me like this. Tears start welling up in my eyes but I hold them back. I go back into my room and close the door.

I am feeling a little overwhelmed after my conversation with Jabari so I pull out my journal so I can write out my feelings. Before the retreat, a situation like this would’ve sent me straight down the depression hole but I am actively choosing a different response. My sad thoughts will not beat me this time.

wednesday, June 30th

Journal entry 27th

Jabari just yelled at me. He never does that and I mean NEVER. I don't know what's going on with him. I don't see what could've happened in his session that could make him act this way. In my session, my parents were extremely open and understanding so I highly doubt they would've switched it up on my little brother. I'm trying not to take it personally

because I know he must be going through something. I just want to be there for him. we promised each other that we would talk to each other about everything. why is he shutting me out? ugh, I hate this. Jabari has always been the light at the end of my tunnel so now I need to be that for him. I'm going to try to give him a little space and wait for him to come to me. I know he will. I'm really proud of myself right now because I didn't let my anxious thoughts get the best of me. I think I hear my mom calling me for breakfast so that's all for now.

-xo Halle

I go downstairs to see that my mom is back and better with another big breakfast spread. There is chicken and waffles, grits, scrambled eggs, and what looks like all of the fruit that the grocery store had. When Jabari comes downstairs, he looks a hell of a lot happier than he did when I saw him in his room twenty minutes ago. I'm starting to think that maybe I was projecting emotions on him when I was in his room earlier. Maybe he reacted the way he did because he was just groggy and sleepy. Who knows?

After breakfast, I go in the backyard so I can call James. The phone rings not even half a dial tone before he answers the phone. I really love that about him because I remember my, now meaningless, middle school relationships when you'd have to call the guy over ten times to get him to answer once.

We catch up on what we've been doing since we've been home which isn't all that much considering we've only been home for two days. He tells me that there is going to be a parade downtown for the Fourth of July on Saturday and he asks me if I will go with him. I've always

known about the parade Jackson hosts but I've never actually gone. The idea of a Fourth of July parade has always seemed silly to me. I'm more of a Juneteenth celebration type of girl, if I do say so myself, but any time that I can spend with James is time well spent. I agree to go to the parade with him and he tells me to invite my little brother.

I think I want to invite Alexander and Savannah too since Vicksburg is only like forty-five minutes away from us. I also know how badly Alexander wants to see Steven so this is the perfect opportunity. James reads me a few poems that he has written since he's been home and with every word he reads, I love him even more. When we are done talking, I go back in the house so I can prepare our dog to go on a walk.

I get Tucker all dressed in his cute little booties. It is ridiculously hot here in the summer so the boots are absolutely essential to protect his paw pads. I grab his leash, and we start heading to the door when Jabari says that he wants to join us on our walk. This is perfect because hopefully now he will talk to me about what's up with him or, at the very least, I can get some assurance that I was projecting on him and that he's actually fine.

We've been walking for about five minutes and we're keeping all of the conversation mainly casual. I tell him about the parade and he agrees to come with us. We pause to give Tucker some water because, like I said, it is ridiculously hot outside. When we start walking again, Jabari brings up me coming into his room this morning. Finally.

"So about this morning," Jabari says.

"Yeah?" I say.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you. I didn't mean to do that. I was just really tired."

"Yeah, I figured. Is everything cool with you though? You've been kind of quiet lately."

“Yeah, I’m good. I’ve just had a lot on my mind ever since I had the session with our parents.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“It was nothing bad. We actually had a really good session. I was able to talk to dad about how I feel like he is too hard on me sometimes. He said he was just trying to motivate or whatever because he knows I want to make it to the League. He apologized for being so hard on me and we talked about different ways for him to motivate me.”

“That all sounds like it was good. You don’t seem like you are happy though.”

“I mean, I guess I am. I think it’s just been all this mental health stuff. It’s been a lot of hard work. I was just a little overwhelmed.”

“I totally get that. It’s kind of like an emotional hangover. We’ve spent so much time talking about our feelings that it’s worn us out.”

“Yeah exactly, an emotional hangover. I’m all good sis, really. I just need a break.”

“How about a little round of one on one? It’ll clear your head.”

“Ha, we both know how that game is going to go but let’s do it.”

Jabari and I finish our walk with Tucker and then we head to the street court to play a few games. Jabari beats me in every single game except for one. I’m pretty sure he lets me win that one out of pity but it’s a win nevertheless. After our game, I go take a shower and get ready to call Abbey. We decided that we would have FaceTime calls for reading too so I can hold her accountable this week. I grab one of my favorite books and walk to the backyard so I can lay on the hammock. I call Abbey and we read together for hours. In fact, Abbey is able to finish one of her books during our call so now she has one down and three more to go.

Today is a very busy day. The Fourth of July parade is tonight and the church's Fourth of July celebration is tomorrow. The celebration tomorrow means that Ms. Ronda and a whole slew of the other church ladies are coming over to cook. I don't understand why they aren't cooking at Ms. Ronda's house considering she's the one hosting this thing but to each his own.

I spoke with Savannah early this morning to see when she and Alexander will be getting here. They want me to show them around a little bit before the parade so they are going to get here around noon. My mom said that they can spend the night and come to the celebration tomorrow. I haven't had a sleepover since I was literally in elementary school so this will be fun.

I am up in my room journaling when I start hearing a whole lot of laughing and kekeing which lets me know that Ms. Ronda and the other church ladies have arrived. If my mom starts hearing any movement upstairs, she'll call me to come help so I'm trying to be as quiet as I possibly can. The last thing I want is for Ms. Ronda to start asking questions about the camp she thinks Jabari and I have been at. I don't know what it is about that woman that makes her think she is entitled to know everybody's business.

Even though I have barely made a sound, my plan to not have to help is a total bust. I receive a text message from my mom that reads, "S.O.S come help down here." I translate this text essentially to mean that Ms. Ronda has started talking out the side of her neck again and she wants me down there to shift the conversation.

I'll be honest, I am one hundred percent taking my dear sweet time to get downstairs. I do my entire skin care routine which consists of a cleanser, exfoliant, mask, and a serum. I haven't been able to do any of this while I was gone so I am really soaking it in now. I am **laying** on my bed with a tea tree mask on when I receive another text from my mom that reads, "Halle!" Ugh,

fine. I guess I really have to go downstairs now. I wash off the green mask and put on my serum. I slip on a pair of yellow overalls and I head downstairs to see what all the fuss is about. “Well don’t you look like a little ray of sunshine,” Ms. Ronda says. I smile and walk over to her to kiss her on the cheek. “Good morning Ms. Ronda.” I greet all of the other women and kiss them on the cheek as well. Kisses on the cheek are one of the bougie things that is an absolute must around these ladies unless you want to get looked at sideways.

I walk over to my mom who is practically knee deep in chicken flour with sweat forming on her brow. I whisper to her, “what’s going on?” She speaks through gritted teeth and says, “Halle, this woman is about to drive me up a wall.” I laugh and rub her back a little. That’s Ms. Ronda for you.

It looks like some of the cakes are ready to be frosted so I go pull out all of the icing from the fridge. I don’t mean to toot my own horn or anything but nobody can decorate a cake better than me, or bake a cake better than me for that matter. My grandma taught me how to do it when I was younger and I’ve loved it ever since. I decorate each of the cakes in prime Fourth of July fashion with red, blue, and white stars. I sneak a piece of the red velvet cake but from the way I decorated it, no one will notice. I am relieved from my cake decorating duty when I hear a friendly knock at the door. Alexander and Savannah are here.

I introduce them to everyone in the kitchen and then I give them a quick tour of the house. As I am walking up the stairs to show Alexander and Savannah the guest room, I can hear Ms. Ronda whispering about Alexander. The words are a little muffled to me but I can tell that she is talking about him being gay. I hear a lot of “it’s just not right” and “I’m going to pray for him.” I swear I am impatiently waiting for the day that someone puts that woman in her place.

She is so judgemental for no reason. It's hoity toity people like her that make people leave church to begin with. Thankfully, Alexander and Savannah are already up the steps so they are spared from hearing all the crap spewing from that woman's mouth.

I am *heated* after hearing what Ms. Ronda was saying, and I know that Alexander and Savannah can tell something is bothering me. That's one thing about spending so much time at a mental health retreat and getting so close with people, they can tell when something is up. I don't really feel like dampening the mood with all of the mess going on downstairs so I tell them that I just need to meditate. I haven't actually meditated outside of the retreat or without the guided words of Mr. Thompson so I'm not sure of what to do other than to close my eyes and be still. Savannah and Alexander offer to meditate with me so we go on YouTube to find a guided meditation that we can listen to. We click one about cultivating a positive mindset and it is exactly what I need.

The meditation begins with the words, "Today, I summon to my life a positive mindset in which I can let go and be at peace." I feel myself grow more and more relaxed with every word. We briefly touched on the Law of Attraction while we were at the retreat which is essentially speaking into existence the things you want for yourself and how your thoughts manifest themselves into reality. I think of this as I am meditating because part of having a positive mindset is saying that you have one.

The meditation continues, "around every corner and in every experience, there is a miracle that I embrace. I see beauty all around me." I take more deep breaths and float further into this peaceful, positive state of mind. At that moment, I hear Tucker scratching at my door to get in but he's going to have to wait these next few minutes. I focus again on the voice in the

meditation, “Right now, I surrender control and accept my life just as it is; knowing that everything is well and everything will be well.” The power in this affirmation draws a tear out of my eye and it slowly rolls down my cheek. *Everything will be well*. The meditation ends with this, “Through gratitude, acceptance, and understanding, I have cultivated a positive mindset. What I sow is what I reap.” Amen to that!

We slowly open our eyes when the meditation ends and it looks like we all have shed a tear or two. We laugh and wipe our tears as we talk about how calm we all feel now. We check the time to see that literally only five minutes have passed. It amazes me how drastically someone’s mood can change in just a few minutes. We have a few hours until it’s time for the parade so we watch a few movies in the meantime.

Thankfully, I set an alarm to alert us to start getting ready because when the alarm does go off, Alexander, Savannah and I are two kleenex boxes in from watching *The Notebook*. That, “if you’re a bird, I’m a bird” gets me every single time. I pause the movie so we can start getting dressed. James is going to be here at 4:30 to pick us all up so we have about forty-five minutes to be fully ready. I offered to drive since there will be so many of us but James says we will all fit in his mom’s Escalade.

Since Jackson isn’t on the Gulf Coast, we basically treat the Fourth of July like it’s Mardi Gras. I get fully decked out in a red shirt and a red, white, and blue tutu. Savannah paints little fireworks on my face and I am officially parade ready. For whatever reason, I am starting to feel a little anxious. The last time I went to any kind of parade it was in elementary school when the kindergartners had their little Thanksgiving parade. Those parades don’t really count though so this is my first big parade. More than anything, I am excited to see James again. These past five

days without him have felt like an eternity. I'm being dramatic, I know, but I'm a teenager in love so who cares.

I hear a honk outside that lets me know that James and Steven are here. I can barely contain my excitement, and I start running down the steps so I can get to him. I am immediately slowed down and humbled when I trip down the stairs and bust my knee. I should've known better than to run down the stairs because I am as clumsy as they come. My knee isn't too bad but it does have a large scrape and it's bleeding a little. Just as I am picking myself up, my mom opens the door to let James and Steven in. Jabari comes down the stairs to see what all the commotion is and almost instantly starts laughing when he sees that I have fallen, typical little brother stuff.

I'm not the type to play the damsel in distress but when James sees me on the ground, he definitely takes on the knight in shining armor persona and I let him. He picks me up and carries me to the kitchen so he can dress my wound. James begins to clean my wound with the first aid kit my mom gave him. I can definitely see my mom watching like the first time a parent sees their kid start walking. I find it amusing that she looks so engrossed in what is happening so I just let her watch.

"Does that hurt?" James asks me. It doesn't really hurt all that much but I like how tender he is being so I fake a wince and say, "Yeah, it does." James makes his already gentle touch even more delicate and he finishes cleaning the scrape. Once he finishes, he puts a bandaid on my knee and kisses it softly. "Good as new," he says. I almost forget that my mom, along with all my other friends, were watching from the dining room so it makes me blush a little when I remember

that they are there. After my mini melodramatic moment, we all load into the Escalade to head to the parade.

When we arrive at the parade, I'm a little confused because there is barely anyone here yet. The only people that are here are the ones that will actually be in the parade. I see them all doing finishing touches on their floats and getting their beads together.

I turn to James and say, "Didn't you tell me that the parade starts at 5 p.m.?"

He smiles at me and says, "No, I said that we need to get here at 5 p.m."

Even more confused, I ask, "Why did you want us to get here so early?"

"Because we are in the parade," he says.

"What are you talking about? No we aren't. People had to sign up to be in the parade months ago. There is no way."

"My uncle knows one of the business owners with a float in the parade. You said that being in a parade was on your bucket list so I had him help me out and pull a few strings."

Shocked, I say, "James are you serious? Are we really going to be in the parade?"

He laughs and says, "Hell yeah we're going to be in the parade. Come on, I want to show you the float."

James grabs my hand and walks me to the most elaborate float out here. The float has a huge, and when I say huge, I mean *massive*, red and blue USA sign that looks like it was crafted with the same stuff you see on the outside of a piñata but better and significantly shinier. Next to it, is an even larger star, it's got to be close to one hundred feet, that is decorated to resemble the American flag. There are also red, white, and blue tassels and tendrils hanging from the float. I

notice a large cannon ball on the float that James tells me will launch confetti at the end of the parade. There is a big speaker blaring music that is sure to energize the crowd.

James introduces everyone to his uncle and then we are given beads, toys, and candy to throw to the crowd. Since our float is so big, we get to have all of the cool entertainment in front of us. The local marching band, color guard, and dance team will lead the way and then we will follow.

The parade finally begins around 6 p.m. with the sound of two gunshots going off. In Jackson, if you hear gunshots that most likely means you need to run for cover but it's a good thing today. My friends and I start throwing out the goodies as we see people smiling, laughing, and having a good time. At one point, I see my parents with Tucker in the crowd so I throw them extra beads and goodies.

My thoughts flashback for a second to how I felt right before my suicide attempt. I couldn't see it then but now I know that life truly does get so much better. I'm happy I failed. I wouldn't want to have missed out on all of this. I turn to James to see that he is already looking at me in admiration. "What is it?" I say. "Oh nothing. You're just so beautiful when you smile," he says.

As the parade comes to a close, James's uncle tells me that I get to light the cannon to release all of the confetti. I light the cannon, and we all watch as glitter and confetti literally spew everywhere in a glorious red, white, and blue shower. Fireworks start going off and the song "America the Beautiful" starts playing in sync from every float with a speaker. It was the perfect ending to the most perfect parade.

James drives us all back to my house, and he and Steven hang out for a bit for dinner. My dad and James end up having a very in depth talk about writing and poetry. I didn't know it before but my dad used to write poetry too. I walk James out when it is time for him and Steven to go, and I mouth the words "thank you" to him as he leaves. He winks at me and then closes the door.

My mom wakes us all up bright and early so we can make the final preparations for the stuff we are bringing to the church's Fourth of July celebration at Ms. Ronda's house. My dad told me last night that Ms. Ronda recently got a fully enclosed fence which means we can bring Tucker. Last year, the celebration was at a church member's house without a gated fence and we ended up chasing Tucker around the neighborhood trying to catch him after he spotted a stray cat.

I go make sure that Alexander and Savannah are up and getting ready, and we talk about how fun the parade last night was. Alexander mostly talks about how happy he was to be with Steven which is totally relatable because that's how I felt about seeing James. I give them a quick run down of everyone that will be at the celebration so they can mentally prepare themselves. For the most part, everyone is pretty chill and extremely welcoming; it's Ms. Ronda that they have to worry about. My plan is to avoid her at all costs because today is supposed to be about community and having fun.

Jabari puts Tucker's Fourth of July bandana and hat on, and then we help to load the food into the car. We live right across the street from Ms. Ronda so we are mostly only driving to transport the food a little closer and then I'll park the car back in our driveway. I suggest that we simply walk the food over but my mother is worried that we'll drop something.

Everyone starts arriving at Ms. Ronda's house around 11 a.m. but nobody is going to get to eat anything until noon rolls around. Ms. Ronda has a big inflatable bounce playhouse and water slide for all the kids and I'm definitely about to get on it. I'm almost eighteen but that doesn't mean I still don't like to jump around. James and Steven arrive, and then we all run to the playhouse, knocking a few little kids over on the way. Look at us, jumping around and playing like little kids; our counselors back at the retreat would be proud.

It is finally time to eat and I am oh so thankful because all that jumping really worked up an appetite. Everyone starts to form a large circle so we can hold hands and say the prayer. Savannah and Alexander look a little confused by all of this so I tell them to just roll with it. Pastor Mike begins blessing the food, and James gently squeezes my hand as we pray. Pastor Mike gives the type of prayer that'll last well over ten minutes so I start mentally checking out after the first two minutes. Apparently, so has most of the congregation because I peek open my eyes and I see a lot of people are playing with the grass with their feet or sneaking small pieces of chicken into their mouths.

After Pastor Mike's prayer, or rather his mini sermon, finally ends, we all line up to get food. I fill my plate with bbq chicken, collard greens, macaroni and cheese, candied yams, crab legs, and my mom's amazing potato salad. I told my mom that James is a vegetarian so she made sure that no one cooked any of the vegetables with meat in them so he will have something to eat.

We are all busy stuffing our faces when I notice Ms. Ronda doing what she does best: talking about something that in no way concerns her. I can't hear what she is saying but I can see

her saying something and then glancing over at Alexander and Steven. My mom gets up to grab another drink from the cooler when Ms. Ronda gestures for her to come over.

“Sister Myers, who are the two young men that are with Halle and Jabari?” Ms. Ronda asks as she looks over at Alexander and Steven.

“Those are Halle’s and Jabari’s friends from camp. They are really nice boys,” my mom says.

“I see, I see. What did you say that camp was for again? I tried looking it up and it sounded like it is for troubled kids. Also, those boys sure do look mighty comfortable with each other. Almost *too* comfortable.”

My mom lets out a long sigh and says, “So what? They aren’t doing anything wrong. And why are you so concerned about the camps I allow my children to go to.”

“Well, I just wanted to make sure they are doing alright. And you know what the good book says about boys with boys.”

My mom does one of the laughs she does when she’s over a situation and is about to go off on somebody. A few people have noticed their conversation becoming more heated and have directed their attention to them.

“You know what Ronda, I have absolutely had it up to here with all of your judgemental comments about me, my family, and everyone else here. You have no place to be saying anything about any one. If you want to say something from your *good book* make sure you remember John 8:7 ‘Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.’ So unless you are Jesus Christ himself, and we both know you aren’t, I suggest you walk away from me and keep other people’s names out of your mouth. Enjoy the potato salad.”

A few “amens” let out after my mom put Ms. Ronda in her place and some people even clap. My mother walks back towards our table, leaving Ms. Ronda with her mouth wide open in shock. My mom is not the type of person to go off like that but I am so glad she did it because somebody had to say it.

“That’s my woman right there,” my dad says with a smile. “You sure told her!” He kisses my mom on the forehead and then massages her shoulders.

The rest of the afternoon goes off amazingly once Ms. Ronda realizes her gossiping days are officially over. Everyone is eating and enjoying each other’s company. Once it starts getting dark, the adults hand out sparklers to everyone to light, and then my dad starts lighting some fireworks. Tucker isn’t a big fan of fireworks so James and I walk back to the house so we can put him inside.

We share a few tender moments together but then James suddenly rushes to the bathroom. I knock on the door to see if he’s okay but he doesn’t answer. I hear him throwing up so I go to the kitchen so I can grab a cold rag to put on his neck and a glass of water for him to drink. When James finally lets me in, I ask him if he’s alright as I try to comfort him. He tells me that he’s fine and that he thinks he just ate too fast. I feel a little concerned but he assures me that he’s all good now. Once James is feeling better, we head back to Ms. Ronda’s house to join the rest of the party.

As the evening comes to a close, I start packing a to-go plate. Sadly, I’ll only get to eat this food again later tonight and maybe in the morning. Check-in at the retreat is at noon tomorrow so I can only take so much. I scarf down another piece of sweet potato pie and then I

walk all of my friends to their cars. I would be sad about saying goodbye to them but I'll see them all tomorrow so it's all good.

When I am back in my room, I start packing a few things to take back with me. We only have one more week so packing goes by really fast. I take out the poem that James wrote for me and I read it again. I never thought of how my name is in hallelujah before but the reminder and the realization makes me smile. I place the poem in a safe place in my nightstand along with the affirmation exercise I did with Mr. Evans. I write in my journal for about thirty minutes and then I get ready for bed.

The next morning, Jabari and I are up bright and early so we can go back to Wall-Doxey. We are practically rushing our mom out the door to bring us back. Our dad couldn't come because he had to go back to work this morning. I'm a little sad he won't get to say goodbye this time but it is what it is. It's been a nice week away but I'm ready to go back and finish what we have started.

Chapter 9

Checking in

I forgot how good it was to have my phone back but having to turn my phone in as soon as we arrive back at the park quickly reminds me. I send my final Snapchats and send a quick text to Maya to remind her to keep up with my streaks. I know it's only been less than twelve hours since I last saw James but I'm still overjoyed when I see him.

After I talk to James for a little bit, I go to the girl's cabin so I can settle back in. All of us girls go back to the same bed that we went to the first day we arrived. Unlike my first day walking into the cabin, today I don't feel anxious. I feel comfortable around these girls and I'm glad I have been able to grow so close to each of them. Part of this experience has taught me that my social anxiety isn't necessarily based on my fear of what will actually happen, but rather what I have projected into it. I think when I leave here I'll feel better about interacting with new people.

I'm really curious to see what this week will be about since it's our last week here. I imagine it to be a whole bunch of heartfelt goodbyes and maybe a few tears. We've never made it a whole week without crying at some point, even if it wasn't a sad cry, so I suspect that'll

happen too. I have one more session with Mr. Evans tomorrow afternoon and it'll be bittersweet. On the one hand, I'll be glad that I successfully made it through this retreat, on the other hand, I'll miss having him to confide in and his wise words. I'm sure that he and I will remain in contact but it won't be the same. I'm trying to be a more positive person though so I reassure myself that everything will work out.

We only have one group session this week, not counting our closing ceremony, so I think this week is mainly focused on final relaxation before we have to permanently return to all the chaos of the outside world. I could be wrong though because the counselors love throwing hidden lessons at us. Nonetheless, I'm ready to see what this final week will have in store.

Mr. Thompson is hosting a sunset yoga class right before dinner tonight so I think I'm going to go to that. I mostly want to soak in the beauty of my surroundings before I have to leave. I'm supposed to meet Savannah and Abbey by the lake around 3 p.m. so we can read a bit before yoga but I want a little time for myself before that. I grab a book and head to the nature trail in the woods.

I've walked about a mile into the woods when I start to smell a familiar *skunky* scent. I look around and expect to see James out here somewhere but what I actually see is significantly more shocking. I follow the scent and lo and behold I see not only James, but Jabari, Alexander, and Steven as well. I watch behind a tree to get a full picture of what exactly is going on. There is no way James has my fourteen year old little brother out here smoking. If that is what James wants to do, I guess that's his prerogative. It's been legalized in this state since 2027 but only if you're eighteen, which James will be in a few months. Jabari, on the other hand, is nowhere near the legal age.

I watch them for about seven minutes before I am spotted. It is Jabari who sees me and he says, "Halle, I can see you behind that tree. You might as well come out now." A little embarrassed that my cover has been blown, I switch the topic of conversation from me to the nonsense that is going on before my eyes. "Jabari! What do you think you are doing? You are way too young for this. If you got caught doing this it could get you in major trouble, especially with basketball." Jabari rolls his eyes and this makes me even angrier. I turn to James and say, "How could you let him do this? He's only a kid!"

James looks hurt by my accusation and for a moment I second guess what I saw but I stand firm. James takes a long puff and then blows it in the air. Steven and Alexander are just staring at us, waiting to see what will happen next. I cross my arms and start tapping my foot. "James!" I say. "Are you just going to ignore me?"

My brother turns to me and says, "Halle, you need to chill. It's not even like that."

"Chill? I will not chill! You are fourteen Jabari! I saw you smoking." I say

"No you didn't. You saw James smoking. I'm just here," he says.

"So you mean to tell me that you didn't take a single puff?" I ask.

"Nope. Not one. Besides, why would I do that?" Jabari asks.

"Maybe because you have a habit of doing things that people around you are doing. Do you remember when you were eight and all of your little friends wanted to steal candy from the corner store? You did it with them," I say.

"Yeah, I remember that. I was eight. I also remember our parents saying that cliché we've all heard a million times before. 'If your friends jump off a bridge are you going to jump too?' I learned that lesson already. Come on sis, you should know me better than that."

“Well, that’s not what it looks like. I don’t want you to be negatively influenced” I say, side eyeing James. I hate admitting when I’m wrong. Even if he wasn’t doing it, I still don’t want him to be around it. I know he looks up to James.

“Halle, I would never let your little brother smoke,” James says. “Besides, I have a medical card so technically I’m not a bad influence.”

“A medical card? For what?” I ask.

James takes another long puff and gazes into the distance. “It’s for cancer. I have leukemia.”

Tears start welling up in my eyes. *Cancer*. None of this makes any sense. James has never said anything about this before and I don’t understand where this is coming from. How is this the way I am finding out about this? None of this seems real.

“Cancer? I...I don’t understand. You look so healthy. Why didn’t you tell me? How could you keep this from me?” Tears are flowing from my eyes now and I look over at Jabari. I ask him,

“Did you know?”

Jabari drops his head and says, “Yeah I knew. It wasn’t my place to say.”

“Guys, can y’all give me a minute,” James says. “I need to talk to Halle.”

Jabari, Alexander, and Steven head back towards the cabin, leaving James and me. Once they are gone, James tells me everything. He was first diagnosed with leukemia when he was eleven years old. He successfully went through chemo and he’s been in remission for the past four years. Most of his symptoms have gone away but there are still a few lingering ones. It is hitting me now. The nosebleed, the bruises, the fever, the vomiting, him telling me not to wish my life away.

James says that for the most part, he isn't in any pain. He received a medical card two years ago to help relieve his symptoms.

"Are you dying?" I ask quietly.

"We are all dying my love. We get closer everyday," he says.

"James, you know that's not what I mean," I say through my tears.

"No, I'm not dying. The doctor says that as long as I don't get any worse, I'll be fine. My symptoms aren't nearly as bad as they were before I got my medical card. I'm getting better. I promise," he says.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I ask.

"Because I didn't want to scare you. The only reason the guys know is because we all had a big heart to heart our third week here. Jabari wanted to tell you but I made him promise me that he wouldn't. I wanted to tell you on my own and I wanted you to focus on your own healing. I didn't want to get in the way of that. Besides, like I said, I'm really fine," he says.

James pulls me to him and holds me as I cry. I feel like my entire world is crumbling just as it was getting better. He wipes my tears and tells me that as long as I keep sending him good vibes, everything will work out. James says that he is fine; I pray that he is right.

I stay with James until it is time for yoga. I hate that I miss reading with Savannah and Abbey but that isn't what I'm worried about right now. I'm thankful that it is so hot out here and that the class is outside because when we are practicing yoga, my tears just look like sweat. Mr. Thompson says something at the beginning of the flow that brings me a little peace. He says, "Allow yourself to find a sense of release through your movement. Your mat can hold so much more than just sweat." After the class, I am feeling a little better, a little lighter.

I wake up the next morning feeling really anxious, and I know it's because my mind is consumed with thoughts and worries about James. I'm glad that I have my session with Mr. Evans today so he can help bring some clarity to all the noise going on inside of my mind. Originally, my session wasn't supposed to be until this afternoon but I really need to talk to him now. Luckily, he isn't busy when I find him so he says we can start early.

As soon as I sit on the couch in his office, I place my head in my hands and immediately start sobbing. Mr. Evans gives me a few moments to collect myself before he asks me what is going on. I tell him about James and how I can't imagine what I'll do if something were to happen to him. Even though I know that my healing and my progress is my own, James has still been a huge part of it. Mr. Evans tells me that worrying about a situation that I can't control will do nothing but give me unnecessary stress and anxiety. He reminds me again to focus on the present. He says, "We can never know what will happen to James but for now, he's here with us. Be thankful for that and enjoy the time that you have with him right now."

After we talk about James, we talk about how my week at home went. I tell him about the parade and how thankful I am that I'm still here. I also tell him about the Ms. Ronda fiasco and how proud I am of my mom. Coming to this retreat has done a lot to help me form a stronger relationship with my parents. We talk about the instances that made me anxious and the steps I was able to take to bring myself back.

We end the session with making a plan to have a video conference session once every two weeks when I am back home. I looked into finding a local therapist in my hometown but I'd rather just keep Mr. Evans. He also tells me that at the closing ceremony, each of us will share our new truth or essentially our takeaway from all this. We all came in here with a certain

perspective about ourselves so we will talk about how we view ourselves now. I have no idea what I'm going to say at that but I have about four days to try to figure it all out.

The big closing ceremony is tomorrow. I've been thinking about what I'm going to say pretty much every moment of the day. I'm starting to feel like it'll be one of those things I say when the moment actually comes. That's kind of what ended up happening when we had our initial truth reveal at least.

I have been kind of distant from Jabari ever since I found out about James. I understand why he didn't tell me but it still hurts. That's not something I would keep from him if the roles were reversed. I hate feeling a disconnect from him though so I think I'll try to clear the air the next time I see him.

The universe certainly works in mysterious ways because I completely forgot that we all have to have an individual session with the person we came here with. James reminds me of this when he tells me that he and Steven had their session together earlier this morning. I head to the main cabin to check the list to see what time Jabari and I are to have our session. I check the list to see that we won't be with either of our main therapists. We will be with Doctor Yang which makes me think that this will be more of a final survey of the retreat type of thing. At least, that's what I'm hoping it'll be because I haven't spent that much time talking to her directly other than when she leads a session or that one time she spoke to Savannah and me.

My suspicions were right on target. Jabari and I head into our session with Doctor Yang around noon. The session is filled with questions about how we would rate our experience, what would we change about the retreat, what we found most meaningful, and so on and so forth. Honestly, I've loved pretty much all of it. Though it was sucky at the moment, all of the

introspection, the tears, the worries, and the wonders all shaped this experience into being quite literally exactly what I needed. The only thing I would change is maybe a little more time with our phones but that's just my teenage angst talking.

When our session with Doctor Yang ends, I pull Jabari to the side so we can talk. Jabari explains to me again that the only reason he didn't tell me is because he wanted to respect James's wishes and to allow him to tell me himself. My thing is, if I hadn't seen them all together in the woods, I don't think James would have told me. At least, he wouldn't have told me anytime soon. I think what hurt the most is that just a few weeks ago, Jabari and I promised each other not to keep things from each other and here he is sitting on the biggest secret of the summer. I get it though, James's truth carries a lot of weight.

Jabari and I are back on good terms, not that we were ever really on bad terms, after our talk. I think our session with Doctor Yang helped pull a little sway because the counselors announce to us that we are officially getting our phones back. They say that they want us to all be able to take pictures together and stuff like that. I am stoked because the only pictures I have with my friends are the three pictures we took from the parade which is nowhere near enough. I round up James, Alexander, and Savannah so we can go to all of our favorite spots and take pictures.

As we are laughing and taking pictures, I soak in all of the love surrounding me. I can't wait to get back home and fill a scrapbook with all the memories of these beautiful people. When we are done taking pictures, I tell James to meet me at our spot in two hours. I had a dream last night that I told James that I love him. I'm the type of person that thinks dreams are some sort of

universal sign so now I am set on telling James how I feel. I haven't really thought out how I'm going to go about it but we all know that's pretty much how I am with most things that I say.

After a little more thought, I decide that I will tell James how I feel in a language that he understands the most. Poetry. The only time I've ever written a poem is when I was in middle school and we had just learned about it. Even though I haven't had much practice, I am willing to try. I think there is something so beautiful about permanently inscripting your deepest and truest thoughts. Something so beautiful about feeling so much that you craft it into an eloquent love story that you understand the most. Something that can be read over and over again by those you wish to bear your soul. Yeah, something like that.

I have about an hour and forty five minutes to write a poem that can do justice the feelings I have for James. My best work is produced when I'm under pressure which I credit to the high functioning anxiety side of me. I spend the first thirty minutes just sitting with myself by the lake in silence. I close my eyes and soak in my surroundings only using touch, smell, and sound. I clear my mind of other thoughts and focus on allowing myself to be present with my current task. I open my eyes and allow myself to revel in this new found sensation of sight. It truly is absolutely stunning out here. I look at the birds flying over the lake and watch as a single butterfly cascades through the sky and lands ever so gently on the blank page..

I watch the butterfly for the entire glorious three minutes that it allows me to admire it. As the butterfly begins to fly away, floating into the ever present openness and freedom of clear sky, I become confident in the words, in the story, I wish to tell.

Butterfly lessons

I wander around aimlessly,
exploring the world before me alone,
Until I meet a gentle keeper,
coaxing me in, begging me to stay.

"Come a little closer" says the keeper. "Let me tell you a secret."
And with every velvet word of the keeper,
I am wrapped still into a silky cocoon of ecstasy that becomes my safe haven.
It is new, it is scary, but I am completely enamored.

The keeper tells me that now it is time for more.
Time to spread my wings and try my hand at passion,
To let him see my enchanting love take flight.
"Come out gently, try easy," the keeper says to me.

I was afraid of the freedom this love would bring,
Afraid of the adventure.

I emerge from my cocoon to find,
as easy as it was to let my keeper immerse me in a love so tender,
So effortless it is for me
to use that love and fly.

-xo Halle

James meets me at our spot and flashes me one of his award winning smiles when he sees me. I'm really going to miss seeing that smile every single day. I was initially a little anxious about giving the poem to James. I believe that he will love it but I've always been really nervous about letting people read my writing. There is something so personal, so intimate about it. I am brought back to serenity when James hugs me and gently kisses my lips.

We talk for a few moments and I decide now is the time for me to give James the poem. Mr. Evans said to me once that there is no such thing as the right time to do something as people so love to call it. Sure there are ideal circumstances that could be in place when someone makes

a decision but a lot of life is really about having the guts to do something. Feel the fear and do it anyways, right? Even though there is no such thing as the perfect moment, right now feels like as perfect as it gets. The sun is slowly beginning to set, the air surrounding us is warm and inviting, birds fill our ears with their melodious music, and I'm more in love with James than ever.

I look at him and tell him that I was able to cross something else off my bucket list. He looks really excited and he eagerly asks me what I did. I pull the poem out of my pocket and I gently place it in his hand. He looks confused yet intrigued, and he begins to unfold the paper.

I watch his eyes dance across the page as he reads and I catch every slight movement of his face to try to get a glimpse into what he is thinking. As he is nearing the end of the poem, he slowly begins to inch closer to me and he places his hand on my thigh. He turns to face me and our eyes meet once again. Even though the actual words "I love you" are not spoken in the poem, I know he can feel it. He kisses me tenderly and when he pulls away, he says, "Thank you. This means so much. I love it. I love you." I smile softly and say, "I love you, too."

Tonight is the big closing ceremony. I think I have figured out what I want to say now which is a huge relief. The actual ceremony is going to be more of a closing day really because there are many events planned and the ceremony is set to be from 4 p.m. until 9:30 p.m. The counselors say it'll be carnival style with a lot of games, activities, and eating. I think the truth reveal part will happen somewhere in the middle or probably right after dinner.

As a start getting dressed for tonight, I put on a little makeup. I haven't really worn makeup that often since I've been here but I chose to tonight for a few reasons. The first being that I obviously want to look nice for our last official day here. The second reason being that wearing makeup will encourage me not to cry so I don't ruin it.

The carnival is set up right by the lake, under the large gazebo and the surrounding space. Stringed fairy lights illuminate the night and really help set the scene. There are bingo games, skee ball games, ping pong and fishbowl games, water gun games, cotton candy stands, popcorn buckets, and every flavor of candy you can imagine. We all enjoy the festivities of the night and celebrate our time together.

After we've been out here for about an hour and a half, the counselors announce that it is time for dinner. My expectations of tasty carnival food are exceeded when I see that dinner tonight will consist of hot dogs, baked beans, macaroni and cheese, funnel cakes, fried pickles, fries and vegetarian chicken tenders. Luckily, the counselors had the chefs prepare a lot of the vegetarian chicken tenders because pretty much everyone wants some of them. We stuff ourselves with the yummy food as we all tell funny stories about things that have happened during our time here.

Dinner ends and it's finally time for what everyone has been waiting for. That's honestly a bit of an exaggeration because the only person I am certain has been waiting on this moment is me. I wonder what number I will be today. Will I go first or last? I feel like it has to be one or the other for me.

Every assumption I have about the order our truth telling will go in is thrown right out the window when the counselors tell us that the way tonight will go is one person will volunteer to go first and that person will call on someone to go next. If the person that they call on to go next isn't ready, they can choose someone else to go until we get to someone that is ready. The purpose of this is to encourage us to be bold and to speak when our time comes around but I still think it's a strange way to go about it.

The counselors explain to us the format they want us to tell our truth in but obviously we have total liberty to change it to whatever fits us the most. The only reason for the format is so that we have a little unity in our recorded responses. The counselors have taken photos of us all along so tomorrow before we leave, we will receive a scrapbook filled with pictures of us with our truths underneath them as well as any writing that anyone wanted to include. Our responses will include a little summary of our past or how we felt when we initially arrived followed by a self affirmation based on how we feel today.

We are all handed notecards and pens to write down what we want to say. Once we have all finished writing, it is time for us to begin. Hunter volunteers to go first which I think is very fitting considering he was the first person brave enough to speak his feelings during that initial group meeting.

Hunter begins and says, “When I first got here, I was really caught up in trying to live up to my parents expectations. I felt like I wasn’t in control of my future and that no one understood. Today I affirm that my best is good enough.”

After Hunter goes, Doctor Yang introduces another element into our ceremony. We will each receive a plain band with a hidden message engraved on the inside after we speak. Doctor Yang hands Hunter his band that reads two powerful words, “I am.”

Hunter calls on Lexi to go next. She stands and says, “Before this retreat, I had a really negative view of myself and my body. I did not feel at home in my own skin and I hated my reflection. Body positivity is something that I will continue to work on but today I affirm that I love and approve of myself.” Doctor Yang hands her a band that reads, “Perfectly imperfect.”

Lexi calls on Margo to go but she isn't ready yet so Abbey goes next. "Anxiety and fear constantly ruled my life. I was stuck between worrying about meeting my goals and feeling like I couldn't get anything right. Today I affirm, I have everything I need to get to where I want to be." "Yes I can" are the words engraved on her band.

Alexander speaks next. "I was in a really dark place when I got here. My thoughts were filled with lies that led me to harm myself. Today I affirm, I live in limitless love, light, and joy." As he looks at his band that reads, "it's a good day to be alive," he smiles and a small tear rolls down his cheek.

Alexander calls on Steven so he stands up to share. "Ever since I lost Marcus, I have felt abandoned by the entire world even when I'm around people that care about me. I felt like I would never get over that loss and that I would fall apart if I lost anyone else. Today I affirm, I am feeling a little more at ease everyday" He clutches his new band that reads, "never alone," to his chest.

James goes next and he says, "I was really unsure of my own thoughts and where I wanted my life to go. Being diagnosed with cancer, I found myself wondering what's the point of all of this if I don't even really get a say in what happens to me next. This experience has opened my eyes to see that I am still running the show. Today I affirm, I trust myself to make decisions that will bring me joy." Doctor Yang hands him his band and he smiles as he reads the words, "I am not lost."

James looks at me and I shake my head to say no. I felt like I was ready for this literally five minutes ago but now I'm not so sure. I realize that this moment is a fruition of everything I have learned from being here so I pull myself together and stand up.

“For the past few years of my life, I have woken up pretty much every single day feeling anxious,” I say. “I never knew why I felt that way or what caused me to feel so sad. I hated my life and I didn’t want to be here anymore. My anxious thoughts always beat me down and I felt like I would never be able to be anything more than my anxiety. Today I affirm, I am bigger than what is making me anxious.” That felt really, really good to say. My band reads, “life is lovely,” and I smile because I know that it is true.

I pat Jabari on the shoulder to signify that it is his turn to go. He says, “I used to feel like I was always one missed free throw away from being a disappointment. My love for the game turned into a fear of failing. Since I’ve been here, I’ve fallen in love with basketball all over again and I know that my best is all my family is asking of me. Today I affirm that I am more than enough.” Jabari reads the little phrase, “full of life and possibility,” that is engraved on his band and then he places it on his wrist.

There are four more of us left. Margo says that she is ready now so she stands up to share her truth.

“When I first got here, I was really depressed and I felt like I was in this constant state of aimlessly floating through my life. I felt disconnected from everything around me and like life was just happening to me. Today I affirm, I have the freedom and space to create the life that I desire,” Margo says. To remind her of this freedom, she looks down at her new band that reads, “keep going.”

Margo calls on Savannah to go next, and I can tell that she feels nervous. I meet her eyes and give her a thumbs up as I mouth the words, “you got this,” just as she did when she reassured me about James. She stands and says, “Before I came here, sadness was the only world that I

lived in. I felt like I wasn't in control of how I felt and my mental health was all over the place. Today I affirm, I run my emotions; my emotions don't run me." Doctor Yang hands her a band that reads, "choose happy."

I almost think that Jenna will go last again but when Aria says that she needs another moment, Jenna is the only other person left. She stands and says, "I used to think that the death of my mother was my fault. I have carried that guilt every single day of my life and it has kept me from accepting good things in my life. I didn't think that I deserved it. Today I affirm, the past is over and I welcome miracles into my life." Like all of the bands before it, Jenna's band is engraved with the perfect message that reads, "it is well."

Aria takes a few deep breaths and then says, "Before this, I resorted to food for comfort. All of the excessive eating made me hate myself but I fueled those thoughts with even more eating which made me hate myself even more. I am slowly but surely healing from this. Today I affirm, I listen with love to my body's messages." When Aria sees that her bracelet reads, "immeasurably more," she begins to cry. I've felt a cry like that. I feel her emotional release.

Once we have finished, Doctor Yang stands up to say a few words. She acknowledges how much each of us has grown, and she thanks us for showing up at this retreat physically, mentally, and emotionally. This retreat, really this entire summer, has been a roller coaster of emotions. I see now that the only way out of this crazy thing called life is not by quitting but rather by going on through it, moving forever forward.

Chapter 10

Living

A lot has changed since the retreat ended a few months ago. My senior year has started and I feel like the world is moving in double time. I've kept up with my journaling which has helped me to slow down and feel present even when everything going on around me is moving a mile a minute.

Before this summer, I was involved in a few clubs at school but now I am in a lot more. I've been working through my social anxiety so I have started branching out. I'm involved in two more honor societies, a community service club, culinary arts, and I'm a cheerleader. The decision to take culinary arts was definitely a little James influenced. I've been vegetarian for about two weeks and culinary has helped me learn how to cook. I've got two more weeks to go until I can mark that off my 20 things but I'm almost there. I'm doing really well in most of my classes, the exception of course being science. My grade there is still an A but I have to work the hardest in there to maintain it. Prom is coming up in a few weeks and I'm so excited to finally experience the night of all nights for every high school student's future teenage nostalgia.

Savannah moved to Jackson at the beginning of August so now she and I go to the same school. It's honestly amazing having her here because she has become one of my closest friends. I do feel bad for Alexander though. He and Sav were a team and now he's the only one in Vicksburg. It's not too bad though. We all see each other pretty much every weekend. Savannah is going to invite him to prom so the entire gang will be back together.

I'm not seeing Mr. Evans anymore. Don't worry, he and I still talk from time to time. I just realized that I really wanted to have that face to face contact when I'm trying to talk about my emotions. Mr. Evans was really supportive of my decision and he was glad that I was able to identify what I needed for my own mental health.

My new counselor is a woman named Veronica but she lets me call her Roni. I feel like I have connected with her just as much as I did with Mr. Evans but this time, I'm with a woman. There were some things I felt like I couldn't fully talk to Mr. Evans about just because he's a guy. Nothing against his gender, he was an amazing therapist. The aspect of getting to talk to another woman that can relate to my feelings about feminism or the patriarchy is an added bonus that I did not realize I had been missing.

Another plus about seeing Roni is that her office is only five minutes away from my highschool. I go see her for visits every Wednesday afternoon when I get out of cheerleading practice. Since we are nearing the middleish end of my senior year, it is due time for us to be talking about the big metaphorical conception that is my future. I've spent so much time trying to focus on being present and now it is actually time to dip my toe into the pool of forward thinking. I just hope I don't get too gung-ho and dive head first into the water. When I see her later today, we are going to talk about a few different college plans and see where my head is at.

I walk down my high school's hallowed halls and look around at the atmosphere that has shaped me. If you would've told me last year that this is where I would be today, I wouldn't have believed you. From the direction my life was heading, I was about to end up on the other side but through the grace of all things good, I got a second chance.

I spot Savannah standing by our lockers so I walk over to ask her what her lunch plans are. Most of the time we go off campus to grab burgers or tacos but she got a boyfriend about a month ago so those plans change to include him every so often. I feel kind of bad whenever it's all three of us. It feels like someone is the third wheel which I would say is Bryan because Savannah and I are like peanut butter and jelly. What honestly happens is that if Bryan comes with us, I just hang out with them while we actually get food and then I have them drop me off at the gym so they can be alone. A lot of the cheerleaders hang out in the gym during lunch so I always have someone to hang with.

Savannah and I decide to go grab tacos when the lunch bell rings. We walk towards our cars and from a distance, it looks like there is someone by my car. I walk a few more steps and I see that it is James leaning on my car with his arms crossed looking as smooth as ever. I'm surprised to see him considering he is supposed to be at school on the other side of town but nonetheless, he's always a sight to see. I tell Savannah that I'll catch up with her after lunch and then she heads to go find Bryan.

"What are you doing here?" I ask James with a smile.

"I wanted to take you to lunch," he says as he hugs me and kisses my cheek.

"Are you too cool for school today?" I ask teasingly.

“Ha ha very funny. Nah, I had a doctor’s appointment this morning on your side of town so I figured I might as well stay out and catch you on your lunch break,” he says.

“Was everything okay?” I ask. James hasn’t been to the doctor in months and my mind floods back to the reality of his situation.

“Yeah, I’m all good. Doc says my blood count is looking really good and it’s almost time for me to take less medication. I told you I would be fine.” James winks at me and tells me to get in the car. I hop in and we drive to a local taco shop that serves the absolute *best* vegetarian tacos.

While we are eating in the bed of his truck and soaking in the fall sun, I show James a few ideas for my prom dress. I haven’t chosen an exact style yet but I know I want to wear yellow. We obviously have to be color coordinated and I want to give James time to get a good suit. We make plans to rent a party bus with all of our friends.

Since Jabari and Steven won’t get to come to prom considering they aren’t juniors or seniors, we decide that it’ll still be fun for them to ride around in the bus before and after prom. While we are at prom they will probably go to an arcade or something. Actually, if I’m being even more honest, Jabari will one hundred percent be figuring out a way to convince the driver to take the twenty minute drive to Madison, Mississippi to pick up Jenna. Oh yeah, I forgot to mention that they are a thing now. Not to brag or anything, but I guess you can say my sisterly advice worked.

James walks me to my next class after lunch, and I giggle as I notice a few freshman girls fawning over him. Luckily, this is my last actual academic class. I have math right now and then next period I get to go to cheerleading practice. English is definitely my favorite subject but math is a close second. There’s this thing about how math is the same in every language and I think

there is something really poetic and metaphorical about that. That fact alone is enough to keep me interested in understanding this universal language. When class ends and I've had all I can stomach of trigonometry, I change into my practice outfit that, along with my actual cheer uniform, has become a new source of safety.

Cheer practice is filled with jokes, laughter, toe touches, dancing, stunting, and of course talking about boys. We prepare our routine for an upcoming competition and then we spend time creating posters for pep rallies. Being a cheerleader now makes me wonder why it took me so long to get here because I love it. I've always wanted to be a cheerleader but I guess that I was too scared to go after it. After the retreat, though, I figured that I'd only ever get to do high school and my senior year once so I might as well try a little bit of everything. Just before practice ends, we go through a few more runs of our routine and then we call it quits for the day.

I'm running a little late to my meeting with Roni but it really isn't my fault. I have to walk past the elementary school to get to the senior parking lot and there were little girls selling cookies out there so technically, it's their fault. Those Samoas and Thin Mints are absolutely irresistible.

I burst into Roni's office two minutes late but Roni's face changes from disappointed to delighted the instant I place a box of Samoas in her lap. I fill her ears with stories of my current mental health and teenage endeavors as we fill our bellies with coconut and chocolate. She helps to bring new insight into my areas of uncertainty and we build a plan to help me prepare for the mental shift college will inevitably bring. My top three choices right now are Pomona College in California, Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and Tulane University in New Orleans.

Ending up at any of those schools would be a dream come true so I'm just hoping to get an acceptance letter from any of them.

The weeks pass by and now prom is just around the corner. In the next two days, I will essentially be a new person. My manicure and pedicure is tonight with Savannah and tomorrow morning I will be getting my hair and makeup done. I pick Savannah up after my club meetings end and we head to our appointment. As we are getting our pedicures and doing our best to not kick the poor ladies in the face from all the feet tickling, I look over at Savannah and I can't help but notice how much happier she looks.

When I first met her at the beginning of the summer, her wardrobe mostly consisted of neutral colored baggy clothes but now she'll throw in a splash of blue or just a hint of purple that let's me know she's coming out of her shell. It's kind of crazy how your inner emotions can dictate how you dress but at the same time it may have no effect at all. I get my nails done in the forever classy french tip style but I make it a little more me by having pink rhinestones added to every other finger.

The next morning I wake up and realize that the day every girl dreams of is actually here. Well, the day we dream of after our wedding of course. I hop out of bed, and I quickly brush my teeth so I can go to my hair and makeup appointment. I head downstairs to see that my mother has already finished making breakfast.

That's one thing that hasn't changed yet, my mother has kept up with cooking meals. If she isn't doing the cooking, it's either my dad, Jabari or me. No matter who is doing the cooking, we make sure that someone is and we make sure we eat at least one meal together as family each

day. I love that. We eat homemade biscuits and gravy, and I debrief my parents on all the plans for tonight.

After breakfast, I drive to my appointments across town. I tell the beautician that I'm going for a Black Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* type of vibe but I must not have been clear enough because she reaches for the flat iron when it is time to do my hair. Normally for any kind of fancy event, I would get my hair straightened similarly to other Black girls whenever we are told we need to look put together for something. I refuse to conform to those outdated European standards of beauty tonight so the world is going to have to accept these long kinky curls just as they are.

I tell her that I don't want my hair straightened and she smiles as she tells me that she knows exactly what to do. She styles my hair in an elaborate half-up half-down updo with various braids and jewels to adorn my curls. Once my hair is done, she does my makeup to complete the whole look.

Savannah comes over a few hours before the dance so my mom and I can help her get ready. She's living with her dad right now and he doesn't know anything about hair so I have to make sure my girl looks like her best, most confident self tonight. We help each other into our dresses and now the only thing we are missing is a corsage. James, Steven, Alexander, and Bryan all arrive at my house at 6 p.m. The dance doesn't start until 7 p.m. but we need time to take pictures and to drive around long enough for us to be fashionably late.

As my mom takes pictures of James and me, he opens a small box to reveal a beautiful corsage with orange and red roses, pink Dianthus, white babies breath, sparkly little balls and a yellow bow. He slides the corsage on my wrist, and then he wraps his hands around my waist as I

pin the matching boutonniere to his suit. We take all the cliché prom pictures, and then we load the party bus to ride to our next adventure.

We arrive at the dance right on time at 7:52 p.m. The theme of the prom is always a secret to be revealed the actual night of the dance and I am amazed to see that I have worn the perfect dress to match the scene. The venue is decorated to be the perfect Starry Night with thousands of fairy lights hanging from the ceiling, large gold stars, and dreamy crescent moons. My friends and I dance until our legs start to go weak, and then we push through and dance even harder. Tonight is everything I imagined and so much more. The music switches from fast songs to slow, and James and I dance circles around the room. If I could live in this moment forever, I think I would.

Graduation is just a month away. I've narrowed down my top three college choices to one. I want, more than anything, to go to Pomona College. Talking with my parents, school advisors and Roni has helped me see that I should major in Political Science so I can get on track to become a lawyer someday. Being a lawyer will allow me to get to do all three of my favorite things: reading, writing, and proving my point. Pomona has one of the best Political Science undergrad programs in the United States and I *have* to go there. Plus, living by the beach sounds like a total dream.

I filled out the application a few weeks ago, and now I'm playing the waiting game to see if I get in. The most challenging part about the application was definitely the essay. The prompt asked me to choose a quote that describes me and to explain how I connect with it. The reason that writing this essay was so hard is because choosing the topic was so easy. The prompt

demanded vulnerability of me, and I knew what I had to write. What quote did I choose you may ask? It's by Danny Alexander, "I have traveled through madness to find me."

Over the next few weeks, I do everything that comes with preparing for graduation such as ordering my cap and gown, taking senior casuals, and of course mailing out graduation invitations. I send an invitation to everyone from the retreat, to Maya, and to all of my extended family. Most of my extended family probably won't come but they will be sure to mail me a card with money inside which is perfectly okay with me. I make sure to mail one to Mr. Evans and all of the other counselors as well.

James and I have been following all of the latest blogs about Pomona admission letters, and from what everyone else has been saying, those letters should be coming out any day now. I've been feeling a little anxious lately about what I will do if I don't get in but I do my best to not entertain those thoughts. I've worked really hard all year, honestly all throughout high school, to get the best grades. Not to mention all the blood, sweat, and tears that went into me taking the SAT over five times.

I get home from school to find my whole family sitting down at the kitchen table. I place my backpack by the door and slowly start to walk towards them. A million thoughts go through my head as I am waiting to see what is going on. I'm thinking that either somebody is dead or some other tragedy or huge life event has taken place to have caused us to need to gather like this.

I get to the table to see everyone staring at a white envelope in the middle of the table. It is addressed to me and it has the Pomona College emblem in the upper left corner. As I see the thin envelope, the statistic of only seven percent of applicants getting accepted flashes to the

forefront of my mind. This envelope is way too small to be an acceptance letter. There should be a packet or something, anything other than this thin envelope.

I sit down at the table with my family and I take a few deep breaths. My hands begin to tremble as I reach for the letter. I slowly rip the envelope open to reveal the letter. As I read the words, waves of emotion overtake me and I am reduced to tears and loud sobs in this cathartic moment. Not knowing what to do based on my reaction, my brother grabs the letter from my hands to read for himself. My parents tell him to read it aloud so they can understand what is going on with me. Jabari reads the letter and says, “Dear Miss Halle Myers, on behalf of the Admissions committee and the faculty, it is my pleasure and privilege to inform you that you have been accepted into the Pomona College class of 2034. You have been given this opportunity in recognition of your personal and scholastic achievements. In the coming days, you will receive your official admission packet in the mail so you can familiarize yourself with the campus and the opportunities we have to offer. We look forward to having you at our university.” I’m going to Pomona and I can’t imagine a feeling better than this. It was number one on my list of dreams and now it is officially my reality.

Once I am able to find words again after all the wonderfully overwhelming crying I did from receiving the news, I run upstairs so I can call James. He answers the phone, and when he asks me what’s up, I start laughing and crying. Without me even saying the words, he already knows the news. “You got in!” he exclaims and I say yes through my laughter and tears. We make plans to go out to dinner later this week to celebrate.

The rest of my senior year comes in glorious waves filled with juniors versus seniors wars, pep rallies, sport competitions, tears over final exams, teenage love drama, state testing,

birthday parties, late nights, early mornings, and all the beauty of the in-between. Graduation is tonight, and I feel like everything I have done so far has led up to this pinnacle moment of making it through high school; the end of an era.

The band begins playing the alma mater as I lead all of my classmates down the triumphant walk through our loved ones to the center of the auditorium. When my time comes to take center stage and to accept my diploma, I do so with my head held high and a smile on my face. I can hear my dad yelling “That’s my baby girl!” above all of the other applause. It makes me blush a little but I secretly love it. After everyone has received their diploma, I make my way back to the stage to address my class as the valedictorian. As the ceremony comes to a close, I move my tassel from the left to the right and then I toss it into the air without a single worry on my mind.

The next morning, I lazily roll out of bed after a long night of partying, of being young and free. On the corner of my desk is my graduation cap, diploma, and cards I received from family and friends. I see the card from Mr. Evans on top so I pick it up to read. I open the card to reveal an eleven word sentence that somehow managed to perfectly encapsulate it all. It reads, “Oh, how far you have come since May of last year.” Every day hasn’t been perfect sweetness and light, and there are still many times when the darkness wins. Despite all of that, through all this, I welcome every ebb and flow.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

“12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.” *We Agnostics Kansas City*, 9 July 2019,

weagnosticsaa.org/12-steps-of-alcoholics-anonymous/.

“22 Mindfulness Exercises, Techniques & Activities For Adults (+ PDF's).”

PositivePsychology.com, 16 Oct. 2020,

positivepsychology.com/mindfulness-exercises-techniques-activities/.

“Alternative 12 Steps.” *Proactive 12 without God: A Mindful Program for Lasting Change*,

proactive12steps.com/alternative/.

“How to Write Affirmations (and 10 Positive Affirmations to Say Today!).” *The Lyons' Share*

Wellness, 29 June 2020, www.thelyonssshare.org/2018/10/16/how-to-write-affirmations/.

Morgan Harper Nichols. “Words to Repeat to Yourself.” *Morgan Harper Nichols*, Morgan

Harper Nichols, 22 Mar. 2021,

morganharpernichols.com/blog/words-to-repeat-to-yourself.