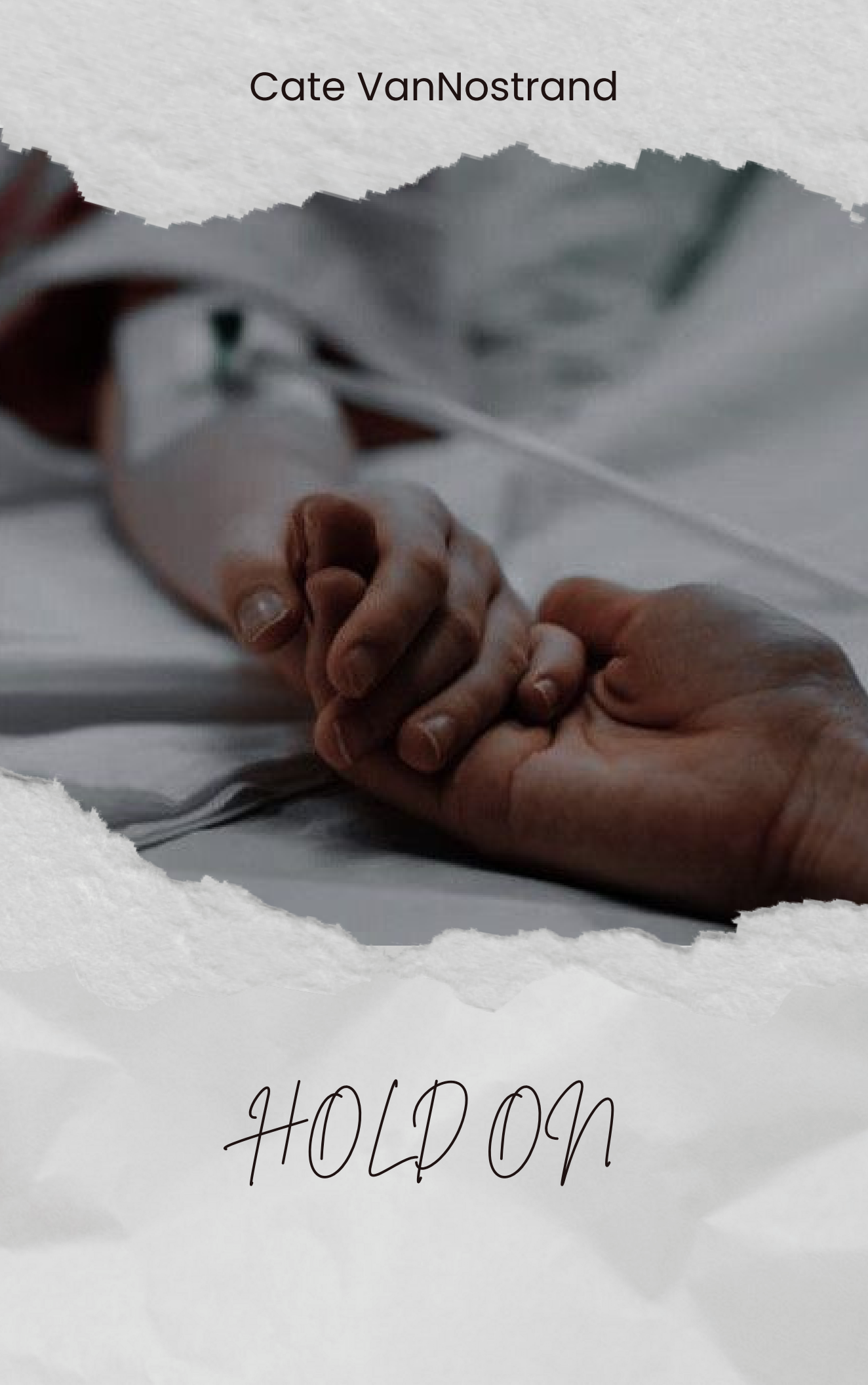


Cate VanNostrand



HOLD ON

Hold On

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Cover by Cate VanNostrand.

Dedication

To anyone who has ever felt worthless or undeserving of God's love:

You are His child, and He wants to help you.

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:13

Heartbeat

I can't breathe. I'm suffocating on my own tears.

Trevor is at the door, trying to break it down. "Lilli!" He yells through the door. "Open the door!"

My back is pushed as far as I can against the wall. I'm willing myself not to break down and unlock the bathroom door. I can't give in. It's only a matter of time until the pills take effect.

A slam jolts me out of my reverie. Trevor is slamming his shoulder into the door. I only sob harder, trying not to let him hear my cries. I should never have let him in the house..

I should've never let him get too close.

I can feel myself getting dizzy by the second; the door sways in and out of my field of vision. A strange sensation swallows me whole and envelopes me. I feel myself falling to the floor, and yet, I don't feel the impact. I can barely hear Trevor. A dark vignette circles my vision, and I close my eyes. I'm so close, and yet still too far from the edge...

A loud thud causes me to slowly open my eyes. Trevor's there, by my side, cradling me in his arms. He's screaming something to me through his tears, but I can't hear his words.

All I can hear is my slowly fading heartbeat.

Hospital

I hate hospitals. The people I've loved the most have died here. My dad, my brother... and now, my girlfriend. Lilli. The girl I'd give my life for.

I bounce my leg anxiously as I sit in the waiting room, praying as fervently as I know how. *Please don't let her go. Please don't take her now.*

"Trevor." I look up to see Mark standing at my side. "Is she okay?" Mark's brown eyes are filled with concern.

I shake my head, not trusting my voice. I can't think; I can't process this right now.

Mark sits on the chair next to me. He rubs his hands up and down his thighs, a nervous tick. "What happened? Like, was it an accident or..." The question hangs in the air, the tension hanging between us like a pendulum.

I swallow the rising lump in my throat, willing myself to talk. "She locked herself in the bathroom. I barely got to her in time."

Mark releases a low whistle. "That's rough."

I nod, not at all fazed by Mark's reaction. But as much as I'm glad for his company, Lilli has taken over my thoughts. *Is she all right? Is she dead?* As much as I don't want to believe that, the logical side of my brain begs to differ. *She took the entire bottle of meds. It'd take a miracle for her to survive that kind of overdose.*

"Have you called her mom?" Mark flips his phone out of his back pocket.

Somewhere in my muddled head, I remember that I haven't told anyone about Lilli. "Oh gosh, no!" I run my hands through my hair. "I totally forgot!"

"Dude, dude, chill." Mark rests a hand on my shoulder. "I'll call her. Just... stay put. Okay?"

I give him a wry smile. “Maybe. Won’t make any promises.”

Mark lets out a weak laugh, but it sounds hollow. “Do you need me to do anything?”

I shake my head. “Pray. That’s all I have the energy to do.”

Nightmare

I open my eyes to a foggy existence. I look around - nothing but cloudy darkness. Terror seizes me, and I start to involuntarily shake. My anxiety is creeping up behind me, at the back of my mind, and I can't run away from it. Fractures of light peak out of the clouds; I look down at my arms and scream. Black chains have wrapped themselves around my wrists and legs.

"Now, now. Don't be scared." A soft voice, as light as air, calms my nerves. I look around, but I can't see anyone. "You can't see me, but I can see you. I see the burden you wear."

I shake my head. "I want to wake up. Please let me wake up."

"If you try and exit the dream now, you will die."

The statement rattles my core. And yet... there's still a part of me that dares to whisper, "What if I don't care?"

The voice laughs, and it's a soft, tinkling sound. "Dear child, no one is that callous about death. Not even the ones that claim to embrace it."

"Try me. My life has been nothing but a nightmare for the last six months."

The voice is silent for the first time since starting our conversation. I'm almost afraid I've angered it. Then it's right by my ear. "Let's travel down that memory lane, shall we?"

I yelp, then shrink further into the darkness. "No! I'm not reliving my memories again!"

But the darkness around me is already swirling. A scream catches in my throat as I'm thrust into a whirlwind of dark mist.

Memory

Lilli's mom, usually the picture of perfected beauty, is just as shell shocked as I am. And it shows on her typically painted face. Her mascara is smeared down her cheeks on both sides, and her lipstick has long been wiped away. As soon as she sees me, she gives me the biggest hug I thought capable of such a frail woman. "Thank you for being here." She releases me from her grasp and pulls out a makeup wipe from her purse, dabbing her face with it. "How is she?"

Lilli's mom is an interesting character. On one hand, she cares so much about her appearance - she's nearing 40, but she doesn't have a single gray hair. Lilli has told me about her mother's extensive Botox treatments. "You'd think it was a miracle drug," she laughed to me a few weeks ago. "She definitely treats it like one." What I wouldn't give right now to talk to Lilli right now. To see her face.

I swallow hard. "She's in the ICU; they're not letting anyone see her." I glance back at the white doors, where I've been anxiously waiting for Dr. Shin to give us an update.

Lilli's mom confidently smooths back her straight hair, but I see her shoulders halter. "I'll just go sit out with Mark then, until we hear from the doctor." She pulls her phone out of her purse. "I need to call Thomas," I hear her absent-mindedly say to herself as she walks away, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I try to conjure up a memory of me and Lilli together, a pleasant memory to keep my fears at bay. I think back to the day when we watched the sunset together...

Sunset

“Okay, your turn.” Lilli’s face is radiant, her fair skin glowing in the slowly setting sun.

“All right. What’s your favorite color?” I know the answer, but I don’t care about asking something I already know. Besides, I’m running out of questions.

Lilli laughs. “Come on, Trev! You already know that.”

I laugh with her. “Pretend I don’t. Pretend I’m a complete stranger. What’s your favorite color?”

Lilli pulls the petals off a wilting dandelion beside her. She tosses one off the edge of the bluff below. “Red. Red is the color of my mom’s favorite lipstick. My dad used red paint to paint the name of his plane. And my favorite guitar is red.” She gives me a knowing look at that last one. I grin, remembering the day I bought her the electric guitar she’s claimed as her most prized possession. She squealed so loud that night, I thought she’d wake up the whole neighborhood.

“I didn’t know it was possible for such a simple color to hold so much meaning.”

Lilli stares back out at the sunset. “Yes, you did.” Her brown hair is illuminated by the orange sun, giving it a shiny golden glow. Her bangs, long grown out since she last cut them a year ago, frame her face and make her look like I’m sitting by an angel. She looks amazing.

“Lilli?”

“Yeah?”

“I think I might want to kiss you.”

Lilli laughs again - not a condescending kind of laugh, but a joyous chuckle. “Really?” Her face falls a little as she takes in my serious expression. “You mean it, don’t you?”

I can feel my spirits dropping a little. “Well, I mean... if you don’t want me to...”

Lilli leans in close, her nose about an inch from mine. “I’ve been waiting three months for you to say it.” She inches closer, and I close the gap between us.

It’s a short kiss; our lips barely touch before she slowly pulls back. I hear her breath hitch, and I suddenly feel very worried. “I didn’t push our relationship, did I?” Lilli has made it very clear of her intentions to keep our relationship God-centered. I hope I haven’t pushed the envelope for her.

Lilli shakes her head. “No; that was perfect.” She clasps her hands in front of her as we watch the last rays of the sun dip below the bluffs. “I just...I never actually thought anyone would want to date me, let alone kiss me.” She cocks her head toward me, in an inquisitive way.

I wrap my arm around her, and let her rest her head on my shoulder. “I wouldn’t dream of spending my life with anyone other than you.”

Before

I don't know how long it's been before I open my eyes. When I do, I'm staring at a house. It's in a residential area, surrounding a quiet little cul-de-sac. Two boys are tossing a yellow ball back and forth, while a girl snuggles in a lawn chair, her nose buried in a book.

"Hey, look down." I look beside me to see a boy, not much older than nine or ten, by my side. I gasp and then look a little closer. "You look like...you look like Derrick." My little brother. Or at least, my little brother three years ago. My eyes burn with tears I try to swallow. I haven't seen Derrick since his funeral. He was such a sweet boy - he was too young to be killed in the car accident that left Mom with chronic migraines and me without a brother.

The boy gives me a grin. "In the flesh; I'm here to help you through your unconscious. You're still in a coma up there, remember?" He points up.

I shake my head. "I can't remember any of that." I've tried, but all I can see is darkness, and all I can hear are muffled yells, like someone is calling my name.

Derrick gestures to the house and kids. "Do you remember this place?"

"Remember it? I used to live here. We lived in this house until I was thirteen. We moved out after..." And then a memory comes flooding back. Until after Dad's plane dropped from the sky. After the bank evicted us because Mom couldn't pay the mortgage. After my grandmother "graciously" offered her house to us until Mom could "get over her husband". Like he was little more than a teenage phase. He was my father, and he loved Derrick and me more than anything else. Well, except Mom, of course. And then... he was gone.

Derrick takes my hand in his, and then we're off again, spiraling away in a flurry of mist and storm.

When my vision clears, Derrick and I are sitting in the front row of a wedding. Pastel pinks and yellows color the otherwise dimly lit chapel where a woman, early 30s, and a man, about her age, are clasping hands, staring into each other's eyes. It only takes me a second to realize where I am. "No, take me back!"

I grab Derrick's shoulder, but he only shakes his head. "These shadows have already happened. I can't change them; neither can you."

I watch in horror as the minister monotones, "I pronounce you husband and wife." A shriek, from somewhere on the bride's side of the family, goes up as the man lands a Hallmark audition-worthy smooch on the woman. She giggles, then kisses back.

I can't watch anymore of this. I turn my head as the crowds behind us cheer and shout. Derrick frowns at me. "What's wrong? You love weddings."

"Not this one." The lump in my throat grows larger with every second that goes by. "That was my mother." The chains around my arms weigh me down, a reminder of the fantastical nightmare I'm living through.

"Yeah, so?" Derrick looks annoyed. "People get remarried all the time. What's the big deal?"

I point a trembling finger at the young man standing next to my stepdad. "He's the reason I'm stuck in my subconscious. He's the reason I tried to die."

Bedside

Margaret - Lilli's mother decided halfway through the long wait that we should be on a first name basis - rushes to her daughter's side as soon as the door opens. "Baby!" She gently shakes her daughter's hand, then glares in alarm and anger at Dr. Shin. "Why isn't she awake?"

Dr. Shin grasps his clipboard firmly to his chest. "Ma'am, Miss Thompson hit her head on a hard tile floor. The injury, combined with the amount of medication she consumed, has put her in a coma." He looks pained to say it, as though it was his daughter lying on the bed.

Margaret does not notice this, however. "Then wake her up! Please!" She starts to cry - for the fourth time in an hour's time span - as she clutches Lilli's hand.

I linger in the doorway. Even though they let me come in, I can't bear to see her like this. With the tubes shoved down her throat, and the IV poking out from the crook of her elbow. I can't see her like this. The thought almost makes me sick.

"Hey, Trevor." Mark hands me a Sprite can. Then he looks beyond me and sees Lilli in the bed. "She looks better than I thought."

As unhelpful as the statement is, I don't snap at him about it; she is his stepdaughter, after all. He was shocked when I called him, trying to tell him through my tears that he needed to get to the hospital. Instead, I push myself off the doorway and turn away from the room. A small chair sits next to the room, and I collapse into it. Mark gives me an inquisitive look. "What's up?"

"I can't... I can't see her. Like that." I wave a hand at Lilli's room.

“Dude, you need to.” Mark folds his arms across his chest. “Look, I get it. You’re afraid the image will haunt you. But you need to see her, talk to her. You need closure. You need to know she’s okay.”

I run my hands through my hair. “I don’t know.”

“If you don’t do it for her, do it for her mom. She needs someone to help her, and she won’t talk to me. She’s just as lost as you are - probably even more.” Mark gestures to the sound of Margaret’s cries. She’s settled down, but her quieted sobs are still audible from outside the hospital room.

I close my eyes and slowly inhale. Then I stand up and enter the room. I sit down in the chair beside Lilli’s bed, and dare to look at her.

Two tubes run through her nostrils, and the IV attached to her is dripping a yellowish fluid into her system. The bags under her eyelids and her sunken-in face are accentuated by the tubes and wires.

But I was wrong about her. She doesn’t look any more helpless than she did on the bluffs, watching the sunset. She looks...lost. Like she’s on a path and there’s no way off the road.

Margaret wipes her eyes again, her smeared eye makeup a concern of the past. “I’m grabbing some things from the house, and then I’m coming back,” she says.

I stay put. I’m not leaving Lilli. I did that once, and she tried to kill herself. I take her small hand into mine; I won’t let go.

Thomas

We're in a bedroom this time around. I notice the movie posters and the dilapidated stuffed animals perched on the bookshelves. "This is my old room," I whisper, taking it all in. "There's my bed, and my shelves, and the TV, and..." I let myself trail off as I stare at the antique clock hanging on my wall. "I know what day this is."

I try to run back into the corner we emerged from, but Derrick takes hold of my arm and pulls me back. "No! You can't leave yet!"

I let my tears flow; I'm not going to hold them back. "Why would you make me relive this day?" I point at the clock wildly. "Do you know what happens here?"

Derrick nods, and that's when I notice the single tear that trickles down his face. "You think I want to show you all this?" He asks, his tone sharp as a knife. "This is the only way you'll break free of those chains." He points to the chains that are still encircled around my limbs and neck. "I'm trying to save your life, and all you've wanted to do is throw it away."

The door to my bedroom opens, and I whip around to see my younger self and my stepbrother enter the room; my blood boils at the sight of Thomas. He's carrying a rolled up poster and my alter self is carrying the frame. "Let's hang it here!" Old Lilli says gleefully, holding up her pink-colored frame.

Thomas grins as he unrolls the poster. A glossy picture of Justin Bieber unrolls and hits my bedroom floor. Old Lilli bends down to pick it off the floor.

I can't move; my feet are glued to the spot in the corner of my room. I watch in sickening horror as Thomas puts his arms around Old Lilli's waist and lifts her up; not in an adoring way, but something else. Something more sinister.

Old Lilli's brows furrow in confusion. "What are you doing?"

“Lilli, you’re an amazing girl. Did you know that?” Thomas leans in close, but Old Lilli jerks herself free from his grasp, her mouth forming an astonished -and repulse - O. “ I mean, we have this special connection, you and I. It’s like...” He leans in and kisses her.

My hands ball into fists. I can’t keep watching, and yet every step, every breath I see and hear all replays in my mind like a scratched DVD. It. Won’t. Go. Away.

Old Lilli breaks the “connection” in a millisecond. “No way!” Her voice gets higher and higher as she realizes what’s happening. “No,you’re... I’m not...I won’t...” She can’t even say it; my heart goes out to the old Lilli. The poor girl has no idea how fast she’ll lose what shards of innocence she still holds.

“Won’t what, sweetheart?” With a vicious snarl, Thomas grabs Old Lilli by her shirt, and this time doesn’t let her break free. Her cries reverberate throughout the room.

What happens afterwards is blurred by the motions of time travel and my own streaming tears. “Stop it!” I scream at the image as it swirls around me and disappears into the darkness.

And all I can hear is the clanking of the chains that wear me down... and the frantic beating of my heart.

Note

“I guess what everyone wants to know is...why.” I trace the lines of the inside of Lilli’s palm, talking partially to myself and also to her. “Why would you just... try and end your life like that?”

Lilli’s silent, of course. Four hours have gone by, and she hasn’t moved at all. I know the statistics: if a person doesn’t make some sort of motor response within six hours, the chances aren’t good. But I refuse to let go of my spark of hope. She will wake up; she has to wake up.

Margaret fell asleep a long time ago, her small form laying on the hospital couch near Lilli’s bed. She lay on Lilli’s left side, and I haven’t left Lilli’s right side since Margaret left for her house.

Dr. Shin comes in with a clipboard, but he takes one look at Margaret and hesitates. “I’ll just put these here,” he tells me, setting the papers and a pen on the room’s counter.

“Hey, Doc.” He turns around at my call. “Do you have her phone? She had it with her when she got here.” Even when I carried her all the way from her bathroom to the ambulance, I never noticed the oblong object.

Dr. Shin points down the hallway. “Check the Lost and Found; I think I saw Mr. Thompson rummaging through it earlier.”

I race down the hallway and retrieve her cell phone. Its red case reminds me once again of the sunset, and I smile a little. I log into her phone; an easy task, since she was never big on security. A white screen, and then a typed message pops onto the screen. The title reads, *A Note*. I frantically press the pop-up.

If you’re reading this, then there’s a good chance I’m dead. I can’t go on living this lie of a life. I can’t tell you why I’m doing this; it’s too risky. Just know I didn’t want to hurt you, and

I'm sorry for all the pain I know you guys are dealing with. That probably makes me sound selfish; sorry about that.

Trevor, I will miss all the good times we spent, all the kisses we shared (and stole). I sent you a gift; it should get to your house tonight, if you get home. I will always love you.

Mom and Dad, I will miss you. I will always remember the day I tried to set you two up on a blind date with each other. God only knows how that wound up being one of the best mistakes I made. Dad, you don't deserve my mom. You remember that. Always.

Thomas, good luck at Harvard. Lord knows you'll need it.

Love you forever and back, Lilli

Unmarked tears sting my eyes as I email the note to myself. No matter what comes out of this mess, I want to always cherish this. The one time Lilli actually poured out her heart to us, and she didn't even expect to be alive to know about it.

After

“It didn’t take long,” Derrick narrates, “for you to feel the full effect of what happened that day.” His voice is all that remains of him as we drift through my consciousness.

I feel like I’m on a rollercoaster ride, watching the events of my life unfold around me. Old Lilli is sobbing on her bed a few days later, punching the closest pillow she can find. “Why me?” She screams to the ceiling. “Why me?”

I feel her pain; she and I aren’t that different. It was only six months ago; it wasn’t a lifetime ago. *But oh, how it feels that way.* The chains around my limbs have chafed my ankles and wrists, an ever-present reminder that they haven’t left.

Another image flashes in my vision - Lilli is in a corner of the schoolyard, shrouded in darkness. She’s grown out what little remains of her bangs; her locks hang in front of her face, like a translucent wall to her heart. A worn hoodie hangs over her small features, and her face is obscured by her phone. But the memory that pains me the most is the small paper bag hanging lopsided out of her jacket pocket. I know what’s in that bag; so do the rest of the school kids, and only a few dare hang around her corner of the yard.

“Hey, Lilli.” A voice breaks the tension Old Lilli has created. I look up - along with her - to see Trevor standing a few feet away from her. His tousled brown hair is drenched from the rain soaking the rest of the Houston High School front lawn. “How have you been?” His rich voice, as smooth as milk chocolate, is full of unspoken concern and worry.

“Do you wish to enter this memory?” Derrick asks, his voice but a whisper in my head.

“Please.” I’ve missed Trevor more than I ever thought was capable.

Suddenly, the thoughts and feelings of six months ago flood my head as I drift into Old Lilli’s consciousness. We are once again one and the same.

I try to turn away and run back to the school, where I know I'll find shelter from the storm. *That's a mistake*, I realize as I hear Trevor's footsteps behind me. He's been the all-around track star three times running. It shouldn't have surprised me when he caught me by the elbow and spun me to face him, but I jerked away all the same. "What do you want, Trevor?"

He looks so cut by my words. "What do you mean, what do I want? You're my girlfriend, Lilli." His words pierce my heart. "Isn't it okay for me to want to make sure you're okay?"

I want to push him off me, but he's already been cut too deep by my indifference. I try to shrug off his worry. "I'm fine. Just... I want to be left alone for a little while. That's all."

"Lilli, what's wrong?" The compassion in his voice melts my insides and destroys what little resolve I've mustered during our conversation. "You can tell me." His face is so close to mine, and I can feel myself drawing closer to him, like a magnet. When our lips meet, my heart sings for the first time in three months. I stand there, in the rain, kissing Trevor as passionately as I dare.

After what feels like an eternity, I draw away. "I can't." I shake my head, trying to clear the muddied waters the kiss has created for me. I can't deal with Thomas and... this. I just can't.

Trevor gives me a look that would make a puppy whimper. "But I want to be here for you," he whispers. "I can't do that if you're keeping secrets."

"It would break your heart," I manage to get out before realizing what a horrible mistake I've made. But the words are out there. I can't take them back.

Trevor's face morphs from worry to irritation. "Is it another guy?" He says, his words light, but his tone as dark as the looming clouds overhead.

And as much as I want to say *No, it's not what you think*, I won't lie to him. I made that promise the first time I decided I would date him. "I can't lie to you, Trevor."

Trevor steps back, all remnants of our intimate moment lost to the howling wind. “But you kept it from me? How long?”

I duck my head so he can't see the tears. “I can't -”

“When, Lilli? When were you going to tell me?” He slaps both hands on either side of me, forcing me to shrink against the wall. “You won't lie, but it doesn't sound like you can tell the truth either.”

His words cut deep - too deep for me to handle. I push him aside and march back to the school. His words follow me every step of the way though. “You can't live a lie, Lilli!” He shouts behind me. “Stop pretending the rest of the world doesn't exist!”

I open the front door to the school and slam it behind me. I push my back against the door and let my tears spill. “I don't,” I cry through my gritted teeth. “I wish *I* didn't exist.”

Rose

It doesn't dawn on me until midnight that my parents are going to freak if I don't show up to the house. I grab my jacket, and then look down at Margaret. Even in her coat, she still looks cold sleeping where she is. I awkwardly place my jacket over her shoulders. "Goodnight, Mrs. Thompson." I stop at Lilli's bed, where she hasn't moved an inch all night. I kiss the top of her head and gently squeeze her hand. "Goodnight, Lilli. I'll be back tomorrow."

I duck out of the room and barely make it out of the hospital before my brain whispers, *You're leaving her again.* But I shake off the feeling, at least for now. I have a responsibility to my parents.

I make it to the house just before one in the morning. I tip the Uber driver and open the front door to see my parents sitting at the kitchen table. My mother is clasping a cup of hot cocoa, while my father sets aside his mug, filled to the brim with pure black coffee. A mountain of guilt hits me; they've been waiting up for me to come home. "Mom, Dad, I am so sorry," I begin.

Mom cuts me off. "How is she?"

"How did you..." I trail off when I see Mark stand up out of the shadows. "I called them and explained everything," he said. "I hope you don't mind."

"No, thanks." I slide into a seat at the table, and hold my aching head in my hands. "THIS whole day has just screwed with my brain. I should've told you guys something."

"Honey, it's fine." Mom takes my hand, hers warm from holding her mug. "How is she doing?"

"She's not... dead, is she?" Mark dares to ask. Mom glares at him, then back at me.

They all expect some sort of answer, so I tell them what I know. “The meds and her head injury put her in a coma. The doctor thinks she has a chance, but it’s slipping by with every hour she doesn’t wake up. She doesn’t respond to anyone, she doesn’t move. It’s almost like...” Mom squeezes my hand, and I take a moment and wipe the tears from my eyes. “It’s almost like she doesn’t want to wake back up.”

“I called the church. They’re all praying for her, Trevor.” Mom sounds hopeful, but when I look at Dad and Mark, their faces are downcast.

“Is it naive of me to hope she’ll live?” I ask to no one in particular.

“Of course not!” Mom stands up, and I’m suddenly reminded just how spiritually mature she is. I’ve joked with Mom about how she can’t do anything without praying first, but in all honesty, her faith knows no limits. Every woman at Open Arms Bible Church is registered on Mom’s prayer chain. Some people would uproot if their son’s girlfriend tried to end her life; Mom plants herself deeper. “God is just as capable of helping her live as he is of letting her come home.”

I’m too tired to deal with all this, so I just shrug in reply. Then I remember Lilli’s note. “Mom, did I get a letter or package or something?”

“Yes, actually.” Mom pulls a brown box from out of the kitchen cabinets. “It has your name on it, but that’s it.”

I grab the box and mumble a goodnight to my parents and Mark. Once I’m in my room, I tear the packaging off the box and carefully open the lid. A red rose is circled around a small, handwritten note. The pastel pink paper is smooth, but the sides are shredded like the paper was ripped from something. I sit on my bed and unfold the note.

Trevor, there are so many things I wish I could redo in my life. Like letting Dad go on that test ride without telling him I loved him. Letting Mom marry a guy she'd just met. Letting Thomas anywhere near me. But I can't take all those things back. So let me tell you why I've decided to die.

Six months ago, Thomas assaulted me. I felt - no, I still feel - so violated by what he did, and I've been buried underneath the weight of it ever since. I tried all the classic ways of burying the shame - drinking, drugs - you name it, I tried it. But everything fell through, just like the school counselors will tell you. I should've known. Now I'm left with what few broken pieces remain of my heart. And quite frankly? I'm tired of living a lie.

I know this has all got to be really hard on you. I didn't mean to break anyone's heart, or cause them pain. But I'm suffocating under all the grand web of deception that I've spun.

I love you. I know you're probably too mad right now to know it. But I do love you. I'll see you around.

Lilli

P. S. Don't tell anyone about Thomas. I'm scared that he'll hurt Mom too, and I can't let that happen.

I throw the note to the floor. *So violated...broken pieces...tired of living a lie...* Her words swim in my head, trying to make sense. My brain is trying to connect the words together, but all that keeps blaring through my mind is: *He abused her, and I didn't stop him.*

Death

“Wake up, Lilli. Please wake up.” Derrick’s normally calm voice is wavering, and I can hear the tears in his voice. I open my eyes to see him shaking me. I look up at the clouds above us.

We’re sitting in the Houston High School football field, a storm forming overhead. I get up and look around, trying to find signs of life. It has to be at least midday, but there’s no students to be seen. “What’s wrong with this place, Derrick?”

Derrick doesn’t respond. I look back down to see him shaking, his sky blue eyes tinted with a weird green hue. “It’s the climax.” He shudders again. “I hate this part.”

That’s when I see the dark mist swirling in front of us. A chill runs through my body, even though the air is at almost 80% humidity around us. I step closer to the mist. “What are you?” I shout into the howling wind, which is starting to pick up.

Nothing happens at first, then a shadow emerges from the cloud. The shadow is formless, yet I can tell that it possesses some humanoid shape. It raises what could be symbolized as a hand. I’ve never seen the shape before, and yet I know exactly what it is. *Who* it is. “Death.”

“I am he.” Its voice isn’t more than a whisper, yet its words seem to boom in our ears. They send a shock wave across the field, knocking Derrick and me off our feet and into the fake grass that makes up the football stadium.

Derrick is the first to recover. “You have to stop him!” He yells at me, tugging me up.

But I just sit there, contemplating everything I’ve seen. Death takes another step, and Derrick pulls harder. “Why do I need to fight him?”

Derrick looks like I've punched him in the gut. "Because you can be stronger than your past. You don't have to let what Thomas did to you define your life."

"But it's *sooooo* much easier to give in than to resist." In a heartbeat, Death is by my side, pushing me back to the ground.

"I just... I need to think." Now that I'm actually thinking this through, suicide doesn't seem like the best option.

"No time for that, dearie." Death laughs, a raspy cackle that echoes in our ears. Derrick puts his hands over his ears, whining in pain like a sick puppy. It's all I can do not to run to him and wrap him in my arms. "Your time has almost come."

"Wait, what?" What does he mean, my time?

"You're about to take a turn for the worse, dear. And when you do, there's no turning back." Death's lips are pulled back in a grotesque smile, and it reeks of sadness and agony.

I turn to Derrick; he's kneeling in the grass, visibly in pain from Death's appearance. I run to him and pull him up. "But I don't want to leave him. He's my brother. And then there's Mom... And Mark... Oh, no. Trevor." My heart hurts, just thinking about Trevor. *What have I done?* I glare at Death, and hold Derrick close to me. "I'm not leaving the ones I love. I choose life."

Death's smile disappears. "You can't change your mind now. It's too late!" His voice roars through our ears. Derrick and I both scream and cover our ears. Stormclouds roll overhead and rain pours down in thick sheets. Death is releasing his fury because I won't die.

"Fight him off, Lilli!" Derrick screams through his tears. "You have to fight him before he gets you!"

But I can't find any courage left to fight a monster who wants me dead. I'm too tired to try and fend him away.

So I do what I'm good at.

I run.

And run.

And I don't stop until I'm underneath the pillars of the high school, shivering from Death's monsoon. I close my eyes and think of Trevor. His soft, chocolate eyes. His humored grin as we watch fireflies dance above the bluffs. "I want you here," I whisper.

Anger

I'm not angry, I swear.

I'm irate.

How did I not know? How did I not see the signs?

I storm down the hallway to where my parents are still sitting at the table. "Where is Lilli's brother?" I can't say his name; the words already leave a bad taste in my mouth. I clutch Lilli's note in my hand.

Mom looks at the clock. "He should be at home. You should get some sleep. The hospital will call you if anything changes."

I slap the note on the table. "Read it. All of it." I barely get the words out from behind my gritted teeth.

Mom hesitantly slips the note from my grasp and puts on her reading glasses. Dad peers over her shoulder as the seconds slowly tick by. I try to calm down, but all I can hear is the sound of my heart thumping in my ears.

After what seems like an eternity, Mom sets the paper back down on the table. "Lord have mercy," she barely whispers. Dad gently wraps an arm around her.

I grip the sides of the table, trying to steady my voice. "I need to find him. I need to find Thomas."

Mom shakes her head, her salt and pepper hair shaking. "No, Trevor. You can't do that."

Dad echoes her in agreement. "We don't want to butt in something that's not our business."

"Are you crazy?" I slam my palms on the table. "I'm not just going to sit by and let my girlfriend's abuser get away, Scot-free!"

“Seventy times seven.” Mom stands up, her voice firm. “You shall forgive your brother seventy times seven times. You can’t get him, Trevor. There’s no telling what could happen.”

“You might not take the first swing, but he might twist this and make yours the last.” Dad stands by her.

My phone buzzes the table, then pings loudly. We all inhale simultaneously. I tentatively slide the phone closer and read the text on the lock screen. It’s from Margaret. *Turn for the worse, not sure if she’ll make it.*

A loud thunderclap rolls overhead, echoing my worst thoughts.

“Is - is she -” Mom doesn’t dare voice the worst.

“I need to get to the hospital.” I pocket my phone, then grab my hoodie at the back door. Dad tosses me the car keys, and with a muttered “bye”, I exit my house and into the pouring rain.

~

I make it about six blocks to the freeway when I drive over something on the road. THUNK! PHISH... I can feel the back tire deflating. I get out and stare at the tire, the air whooshing from behind its rubber exterior. “Oh come on!” I yell at the offending tire.

That’s when it all comes crashing down. Shame, anger, fear... guilt piles it all on like a heavy quilt. I drop to my knees, hugging myself as my pent-up emotions spill out in a strangled cry. “Why?” I scream to the clouds. “Why, God?” The pouring rain mixes with my angry tears, clearing them as soon as they roll down my face.

I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS.

“Then why did you take her? She doesn’t deserve this!” I lift my hands over my head, to the sky, begging him for an answer.

DO NOT FEAR, FOR I AM WITH YOU.

This isn't God's fault. This is Thomas' fault. The thought takes root in my mind and doesn't leave.

“What do I do, God?” I whisper, forcing myself to stand up. I look up to the dark night clouds, where the rain has lessened to a drizzle. “What should I do?”

Then I hear the last of my tire deflate as it flops fully to the ground. *Well I'm no genius, but I'd put my spare tire on first.* I pop open my trunk and pull my spare tire out.

“Hey, need some help?” The voice freezes my blood. I know who it is, but I can't turn around. I grit my teeth together, willing my hands not to ball into fists.

I clip my voice, trying to pretend to be civil. “No, I'm good. Just need to replace the tire.”

“Oh come on, let me help. You'll need a wrench for that.” I turn around to see the good samaritan as he steps into the light of a nearby streetlamp.

Thomas.

Hope

“You can’t hide forever, you know.” I dodge one of Death's tentacles, ducking behind another pillar. My tears are long gone; now I’m just focused on surviving this nightmare.

“Stop him, Lilli!” From my view underneath the school, I can see Derrick being squeezed tighter by Death’s grasp. His face is turning red from lack of oxygen, and he’s gasping for air.

I can’t let him die. Not because I was a coward.

I step out of the shadows. “Come on, creep! You can’t skulk around forever!” I scream at the black shadows. I’m shaking so hard, the chains around my body start to rattle.

“Well actually,” Death cackles, “I can. But that’s hardly relevant.” Death releases Derrick, who falls into the grass, unconscious. Death’s tentacles join each other and merge into one form. Out of the shadows steps a middle-aged bald man, wearing an average polo shirt and jeans. “Here’s the deal,” he says, his voice quiet and soft. So unlike the booming rage-filled voice of his counterpart. “You come with me, and Derrick can walk away free.” He flicks his wrist, and the mist wraps around his arms. “I’ll even see to it that Thomas is disposed of.”

“Why should I trust anything you have to say?”

“Because I have powers you couldn’t begin to fathom, mortal girl. With a lift of my hand, I can make an entire generation give into their worst fears. I can make countries crumble because their most productive members of society are too scared or sad to test the waters. I can make civilizations crumble with a flick of my wrist.”

He’s right about one thing - I definitely can’t begin to understand how he’s capable of all this. But it’s enough to make me realize... “You’re not Death.”

The man looks taken aback. “You’re mistaken. I am Death.”

I shake my head. “No, no. You’re wrong.” I let out a wry laugh. “I have to admit, you did have me fooled for a long time. But you’re not Death. Death not bad, it’s a consequence of sin. But death itself is amoral. *You* thrive on the shame and fear of everyone you touch. You make teenagers like me feel anxious and depressed. You live off of phobias and anxiety and mental illness. You’re not Death... you’re Despair.” And the puzzle pieces click.

The man screeches, and the black tendrils around his arms pour back into his heart. He changes form, and once again, the field is shrouded in a thick cloud of black mist. “You will never say that name again!” Despair’s voice booms in my ears, and I scream at the sound. “There is nothing that can stop me! Even now your fear is filling my lungs. Before long, I will be unstoppable. There is no way you can stop me!”

Every worst thought and deed I’ve ever committed to memory comes flooding back to my mind, and I cry out from the shock of so many memories. Despair is throwing as many fiery darts my way as he can.

And they’re working.

I collapse to the ground, clutching Derrick’s limp form in my arms. “I’m sorry, Derrick. I can’t fight him.” I rock back and forth, hugging my brother’s body to my chest.

HOPE IS ALIVE.

I stare up at the sky. “What? What did you say?” I’ve never heard that voice, and yet, deep down, I know who it is. *God, help me. Please.*

HOPE CAN BE YOUR ANTHEM.

Hope can defeat despair. Even in the darkness, hope is still alive.

“Hope!” I jump up and face Despair. “I can’t stop you. But hope can!” An old Sunday School verse comes to mind. “Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

Despair circles me, his tentacles trying to trap me. They whisper all the lies I’ve ever heard. Some of them I’ve yelled at myself. *You’re worthless. You’re not enough. You’re a hopeless case. You’re unworthy. You’re nothing.*

But with each lie Despair tries to shove into my brain, I fight them off. Every single one of them. *I am worthy. I’m loved. I’m not worthless.*

And with each truth I wield at Despair, a chain link snaps off and flies away into the sky. Just another reminder that I can be free.

Despair circles me, his powers decreasing faster by the minute. “You cannot defeat me! The bravest have tried and failed!” He screams at me.

Waves of exhaustion roll through my body. “I don’t have to defeat you,” I whisper as I sway, trying not to fall. “I just don’t have to let you win.”

And then my world dissolves into darkness.

Forgive

“Here, you’ll need this.” Thomas extends the wrench to me, acting as if there’s nothing wrong.

I take the tool from his hand, the act setting my teeth on edge. “Thanks.” I try to think while I pull my spare out of my pickup. *Do I mention the note? I don’t want to get into trouble. He violated Lilli though! God, I need your help right now.*

Thomas and I never really got along. He was the preppy Harvard student, and I was perfectly content at my “low-down” state university. One would’ve thought from Thomas’ conversations that the college I attended was a leper colony. He was always looking down on others. Always trying to have the upper hand.

And for once, he had actually succeeded.

Thomas pops open the trunk to my pickup. “Where’s your spare? You do have a spare, right?” His tone is rigid, like he’s giving a lecture on changing tires.

“It’s underneath the bungee cords.” I grit my teeth, trying not to lose my cool. My tone is anything but cordial towards Thomas.

“So did Lilli leave you anything? Like, a note or something?” Thomas asks. He pulls the tire out of the trunk, grunting with the effort. I’m surprised he can even lift the tire. Strength is not one of Thomas’ strong suits.

I don’t want to lie. But it’s the only way I’ll ever get anything out of him. “Yeah, she left me a note. She basically told me why she tried to kill herself.”

Thomas looks up sharply; a flash of - anger? fear? - runs through his eyes, but he quickly masks it. “And? Why?”

The bitter words roll off my tongue. “She was assaulted.”

Thomas locks eyes with me, and that's when I see the full-fledged fear. He bolts, running down the sidewalk. "Hey!" I break out into a full run.

Thomas isn't a strong man; he's not very fast either. It only takes me four blocks before I tackle him to the ground. He tries to throw a punch, but I quickly block it. He ducks a hook, and kicks me off of him. "I didn't want to hurt her! I just -" He dodges again, and lands an uppercut to my chin. I reel back in shock and pain, and then he's on me again.

The fight is silent, except for the occasional grunt or tear of a shirt. One minute, Thomas has the upper hand, but I overpower him within the next minute. We wrestle for what feels like hours... until I throw a sucker punch to his jaw. Thomas' head jerks back and hits the pavement. He's still for a long time. Deathly still. *Have I killed him? Oh God, please don't let him be dead.* I scramble to my feet, giving him air.

A minute later, he opens his eyes. "Are you done now? Had your revenge?"

I pull him to his feet by the scruff of his collar. "You don't know revenge," I growl.

Thomas has the gall to chuckle, but it's cut short by a shuddery cough. "You know what? I'm not sorry. She was so innocent... so full of life..." Whatever other twisted words he has stored die away as he starts to go limp. I release him, and he collapses to the sidewalk.

I should kill him. He almost killed Lilli.

VENGEANCE IS MINE.

"But when? I don't want to wait for your timing!" I yell to the clouds.

I WILL REPAY. Not a threat; it's a promise.

~

I drag Thomas back to his car and leave him slumped in the front seat. I finish attaching the spare to my truck, and then fire up its engine. I have to see Lilli before it's too late. I need her to know she's safe.

Breathe

I have to breathe, I have to breathe... I can see a faint glimmer of light, all around me. Darkness is long gone in this in-between. I look down to see Derrick hugging my waist. “I knew you could do it,” he says, a childlike tone to his voice. “I knew you could do it.”

I hug him back. Then I look down at my arms. “The chains! They’re gone!”

Derrick beams. “You don’t have to be shackled to your past, Lilli. Despair chained you to your sadness. Hope set you free.” Then he releases me. “Now breathe, Lilli. You need to wake up.”

I close my eyes and force myself to wake up, Derrick’s voice still echoing in my ears.

Wake up, Lilli! You have to wake up!

You need to wake up!

~

My eyelids flutter open, and then close again. So much bright light surrounds me, folds over me like a thick blanket. I dare to open them again, and look around. Mom is laying on the hospital couch on my left, and Trevor is holding my right hand. He was looking down at the floor, but starts when he sees me looking at him. “Lilli!” He practically yells. “You’re awake!”

Too tired to talk, I simply nod.

Mom gets up; her disheveled hair is a mess, and her makeup is gone. “Oh, Lilli.” She reaches for my hand beneath the sheets. “You’re here.” She gives me her best attempt at a hug, even though I’m surrounded by tubes and IVs. “Don’t ever leave me again.”

“And, uh...” Trevor releases my hand, and rubs the back of his neck with it. “You’re safe now. I had a few... words with Thomas. I don’t think he’ll be bothering you again.”

My eyes burn with lava hot tears. “Trev-”

“Don’t apologize. I had no idea what you were going through. I doubt I would’ve understood even if I had.” He leans closer to me and I feel his breath tickling my lips. “Can you forgive me?”

I close the gap between us, sealing my lips to his. It’s not long, but it’s been a long time coming.

When I draw back, I whisper, “Always.”

Lilli

~Six Months Later~

I'm standing on the bluffs again. The last time we were here was before... everything. I take a deep breath and step closer to the edge of the bluffs. I drop the rock that I've been holding and it falls into the rushing river below. I sit down and watch the currents sweep my rock, along with countless others, past the bluffs and beyond.

"You okay?" I hear Trevor sit down beside me, crossing his legs as he does so.

"Yeah, I think so." I let the wind rustle through my hair.

"I heard about Rhodes. I guess genius really does run in the family." Trevor's voice is full of love.

I don't know how in the world he found out about Rhodes. I do know I squealed at a decibel range not known to humans. Mom must've told him. After regaining her sense of hearing, anyway. "Yep. I'll only be about thirty minutes from home, if that."

"That's good."

We sit here for a while, just enjoying the quiet. I know he wants to talk. We haven't spoken very much since the Incident. We haven't needed to.

Trevor takes a deep breath. "Lilli, I'm -"

"Stop there." I hold up a finger. "Don't say you're sorry."

"But -"

"I don't want anyone's pity. What I did was selfish and in the past. I don't want to talk about it. Ever." Thomas eventually got kicked out of Harvard for getting handsy with another girl. She had the guts to call the cops on him; between our testimonies, his future's not looking so

bright. He moved out of our house three months ago. And just like that, my nightmare ended. It isn't over though. *Will it ever truly be over?*

“Do I get to actually talk now?” Trevor’s lips twitch, a sign he’s trying to hold back a smile.

I almost say no, tell him to just leave me be. But a small part of me is screaming for his help. For his advice. “Sure.”

“Look, I’m not in a position to judge. So I won’t. Okay?” Trevor takes my hand into his. “You were hurt, Lilli. Anyone would understand why you felt that way.”

I offer him a small smile, then look back up at the sunset. “This isn’t the first time you’ve tried to help me. You were in my dream, you know.”

“Really?” Trevor grins, and scoots closer to me. “Was I cute then?”

“You’re very concerned with what I think of you, you know that?” I laugh.

Trevor doesn’t answer, but instead leans closer. Our lips meet, closing the gap between us.

And just like that, I’m reminded of why I chose to stay alive. For life... and a little dash of love.

Author's Note

This story started with a song.

I was listening to music off of a friend's playlist, and the first song was "Hold On" by Chord Overstreet. After sobbing my way through the song the first time, the writerly part of my brain said, "What if this was a story?" So, I wrote a really quick blurb and then wrote the story in about two weeks (which is arguably a record for me, a pretty slow project finisher).

Guys, this was one of the hardest stories I've ever written. And not just because I was writing about topics like sexual assault or suicide. At the time that I wrote this, I was going through depression of my own, and there were so many times when I wanted to hurl my notebook across the room because the self-doubt was so awful. *I can't write this story! What makes me qualified to write this? No one will read this.*

It was a long two weeks. But I was resolved not to quit. Why?

Because this is a relevant topic that needs to be addressed. According to RAINN's website, over 59% of sexual violence offenders are acquaintances to the victim¹. Almost *two thirds* of these horrific crimes come from someone that the victim knows.

My goal is that, by sharing this story, you can understand the devastating effect that sexual violence has - not just on the victim, but everyone around them, and help in your own way so take action and spread awareness.

And while we're on the subject of hope...

I didn't write this story so you would feel sad or depressed; there's enough of that happening without my help.

¹ For more statistics, visit RAINN's page on perpetrators of sexual violence: <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence>.

There's darkness in *Hold On*, but there's also lots of hope too. And my hope is that you will know/remember that there is a God who loves you, and wants you to stay on this earth for whatever purpose he has in store for you.

Love,

Cate

P.S. There is *always* hope.

P.P.S. My email is always open. :)

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To my fanbase - I cannot tell you how grateful I am that you guys visit my (very little) corner of the Internet and read my blog and newsletter. Love ya'll so much! 

And finally, to Jesus - you are the reason I write, and I am so grateful to be writing for your glory. *Soli deo gloria!*

About the Author

Cate VanNostrand is a college student and freelance editor living in the South with her three siblings, her amazing parents, and her imaginary pet phoenix, Lasair. Cate's life's goal is to honor God with her writing, wherever He leads her. She can often be found scribbling down words in a notebook, or frantically typing them into coherent form on her laptop. When she's not writing, she's probably singing to rock music, pretending she can play the piano, and binge-reading YA novels like *There's No Tomorrow*. Find out all about her and her latest work at [the Southern Story Scribbler](#).

