

BACKYARDS

PREFACE

The first time she saw him dance, she could hear the shouting.

Raw and harsh, it soaked the night. The words were broken and indistinct, two people clamouring to be heard.

She was huddled at her second-storey window, overlooking the house with the shouting. Her parents had never fought like this, she was thinking. There was no fighting. No build-up of noise and anger and frustration until it exploded. Just silence. It had grown quieter and quieter, until she was surrounded by half-unpacked boxes in an unfamiliar white room, her mother asleep on the couch, an empty wine bottle by her side.

Doors slid open, and light flooded the backyard next door. In the sudden illumination, she could see fading grass, a Hills Hoist clothesline, plastic green chairs, a scraggly gum tree in the corner.

A boy stepped out. He was caught in the glow spilling from the doors; a personal spotlight. He was still – completely still – limbs locked, fists clenched and, she imagined, eyes closed, but his face was shadowed. The shouting shattered the night, rising and falling, desperate breaths.

And then he moved.

He flung his arms back, his body curving, hesitating, and then crumpling in on itself, rising to throw himself to the side as he spun, again and again, until he came to a breathless stop. He took a step back, and another, faltering, arms raised and trembling in the air, like a child taking its first steps. Arms curving

and lowering around his head, he extended his leg up, touching his torso to his knee in heart-stopping slow motion. And then his whole body seemed to gasp and he was up, moving so fast it was like he was tugged, like he wasn't a boy, wasn't human, but a puppet, strings attached, thrown to the side in a series of heart-stopping twirls with feet that never seemed to touch the ground.

It was something so private, so vulnerable, she almost looked away.

He was something so intense, so emotionally wrought, that she couldn't.

For an immeasurable amount of time, he danced, and she watched. Through the dim light that caught at his limbs in different ways, she began to make out his face, his body. He was angular, skin like coffee and muscles taut. Black hair fell into eyes that never seemed to open. His nose was long and straight, his mouth thin.

Long after the shouting had faded, he went back inside, and she left her window for her bed.

THURSDAY

“Cara?”

She looks up, pale wisps of hair obscuring the edges of her vision. Her teacher is passing, tapping her desk.

Look up. Pay attention.

Chin on her hand, arms propped up on the table, she looks back down at the desk, eyes unfocused, hair spilling over her face again. The lecture is a buzz in the background, graffitied desk a scratchy blur.

Day one. Third period.

Starting at the new school in the middle of the week hadn't seemed like the best idea, but hanging around the house – the dust motes swirling in the sun, the quiet laid so thick – hadn't really feel like an option, either.

She'd spent recess in the bathroom, perched unevenly on the edge of a toilet seat, caught up in a cliché. Shiny black shoes paraded past, doors banging and laughter ringing. It's a busy place, the bathroom. Mascara to apply, teeth to examine, phones to check, conversations to have.

'...piercing, but I told my mum everyone already...'

'...and said – wait, I'll show you the screenshots, hold on...'

' - hear about Kobe and that black chick? I *knew*...'

'...only time I would ever, I swear...'

It felt like dim echoes of a half remembered life. She'd tugged her jacket tighter around her and crossed her ankles.

Still better than home.

She scratches at the softer part of the table, where the wood is wearing away. Tiny slivers cling to her fingertips, her nails flecked with pale pink polish. When they'd been fresh and shiny with the colour, months ago, she'd still had something that resembled a life.

"Hey – um – you're Cara, right?"

She starts, looking up. The room is in motion, chairs banging as they're shoved against desks, the last ring of the bell just sounding over the speaker. She focuses on the source of the voice.

A girl stands above her. She has impossibly dark skin, pale lips and shiny eyes. Her hair is black and messy and thick and her face is full and defined. She's *so much* that Cara stares for a second more than is polite before snapping back into herself.

"Yeah. I - hi?" She winces at her voice. When was the last time she'd talked? Days? No – wait – she said sorry when she bumped into that boy this morning. (He hadn't even turned around).

"I'm Sophia," the girl says. Confident. Calm. People stream around them, and it crosses Cara's mind that this might be some sort of dare, some sort of joke. No one has said so much as a word to her, and now –

"Do you want me to walk you to your next class?"

She blinks at the girl. The room is nearly empty, and her teacher's standing by the door, staring at them, tapping his foot. *Subtle*.

"Um – if you want to. Sure." Cara fumbles with her books and slides off the chair, and they hurry out of the room. The air bites at her exposed skin, and she tugs her sleeves over her wrist.

“What’ve you got?” Sophia’s hands have disappeared into her thick dark curls, pulling the hair back with an elastic. Her arms raise her school dress further up her thighs, and Cara’s eyes get caught on the black bobby pins securing the shortened hem. Blinking, she checks her class.

“Art history. 43.”

For a second Cara can’t help thinking maybe they’ll have the same class, and maybe they’ll sit together, and what’s left of the day won’t feel so lonely, and maybe ...

But Sophia doesn’t say anything, just nods and starts walking.

“So - you’re from the city, right?”

“Close enough,” Cara says vaguely.

“Why’d you move?”

She shrugs. She barely even thinks the reason. Sophia doesn’t press it.

“How are the suburbs treating you, then?” Smirking.

“It’s alright.” Except it’s not. “Not that different, really.” Except it is.

Sophia keeps talking, and Cara tries to nod in all the right places. The dark-skinned girl walks her right to the classroom door and leaves with a *‘Well – bye’*.

The dancer - he’s there again that night.

She’s in the exact same place when the shouting begins. Knees tucked to her chest, back against the window. Her room’s the same, of course - boxes littering the floor, walls and cupboards and bookshelf all empty, mirror on the front of her wardrobe door.

There's a hole in one of the boxes, violent and jagged in the side. The vague imprint of a shoe kicked repeatedly into soft cardboard.

She hates getting angry like that. Frustrated. Upset. Inevitably, it only ends up turning back on herself. Digging fingernails into skin, twisting and knotting hands, trying *to keep it together*. Wrists tingling, body tense. *My fault. My fault. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.* She bites the inside of her cheek so hard she tastes blood.

She can't unpack. If she does, it makes it final. It makes it real.

His doors slide open. Light floods the backyard, spilling over his silhouette. He's still, utterly still, frozen between moments. And then he *moves*. His entire body fluid, arms like water, legs like ribbon. She presses her forehead to the glass and watches, and she forgets about her tingling skin, and she's almost convinced the entire world has stopped spinning for this boy.

FRIDAY, SATURDAY, SUNDAY

The girl approaches her again. Different day, same class. Cara watched her walk in and head straight for the back, the oddest mix of confidence and invisibility. She sits in her chair like it's marked with her name, and no one seems to look at her but everyone seems to know she's there.

She approaches Cara as the bell rings, the room in motion.

"Sophia," she says, in lieu of greeting. Assuming Cara's forgotten her name.

"Yeah. I remember."

“What’ve you got?”

She walks her to her next class, with constant stabs at conversation – asking her about classes and schedules, teachers and weather. Cara is only one-word answers, but Sophia doesn’t seem to mind.

That afternoon, she hauls home two bags crammed with groceries. She had raided her mother’s black handbag for loose change and stopped by the IGA a few streets down from school. There were bare essentials at home – bread and cheap milk and unsalted butter – but she wanted to peel the skin from a mandarin. Select crackers from neat rows.

The plastic handles cut into her hands and wrists. When she finally drops the bags at the front door of their tiny town house to search for her key, she has red marks.

She drags the plastic bags inside. Dropping them on an empty bench in the kitchen, she makes her way up the stairs. If she glances back at exactly the right step, just past halfway, she can see straight into the loungeroom – her mum, asleep, stretched out on the couch.

Her mum – no, *Madeline*. *Her mum* doesn’t seem to fit. It makes her feel hollow.

Madeline, as far as Cara knows, hasn’t moved in days.

When Cara had dragged one of the last moving boxes up the stairs, she’d seen Madeline sitting on the edge of the couch, cracking the lid on a bottle of wine.

A row of family photos is lined up on the TV unit. Madeline’s singular gesture to unpacking.

He’s there again that night, and the one after, and the one after. She spends her weekend in bed, and occasionally on the floor. Mostly, she reads or flips vaguely through school books and homework. She

barely goes downstairs, save to eat. But each night, all weekend – the fighting, the screaming, swelling and rising and falling – and the boy dancing to it; his personal orchestra, a symphony of angst. The sound is her cue to sit by the window and wait.

He comes each time.

He is so open. So vulnerable.

On the Sunday night, he pauses, adrift in his backyard. Hesitates. Extends his arm and twists his body as if to begin – and falters. Pain flickers across his face. He presses his fingers to his forehead. He's still – completely still – but not like the pause before motion, as if something is about to begin. More - as if he doesn't know where to go.

He turns away, walking back towards the house, but the second before he disappears inside, his head flicks towards her, and for one fluttering heartbeat, she swears his eyes are on hers.

And then he's gone, and she's flinching away from the window, heat staining her cheeks.

MONDAY

Sophia finds her outside after class, halfway down the wide brick steps that front the school. Last period has just ended, students flowing around them, heading for lockers and fresh air.

Cara stares. This is a shift in pattern.

“Come do theatre with me,” Sophia says quickly, hands busy in her hair, combing it back and shoving it into an elastic. Noticing Cara's wide eyes: “It's backstage. Just, props and scenery. You can – like – make friends and stuff.”

She doesn't wait for an answer, just grabs Cara's hand and drags her through the streaming crowd. Her skin is dark like a smoky night sky. Her fingers are warm.

They sprint the whole way there for absolutely no reason, hair flying, breath catching. The school blurs into indistinct colours, and Cara instantly decides this is how she likes it best. People stare. Their faces stand out in her mind. But Sophia's fingers tighten on her hand and pull her past.

They end up in the hall, a busy mess of students stretching and lying around, bodies draped over chairs and props and stage sets. Talk and laughter echo off the high ceilings, wooden walls, polished floor. Sophia drops her hand as they enter the room, and Cara drags her sleeve over her wrist. Several girls turn towards them, their eyes tripping over Sophia. One nudges another.

Cara twists her arms together. She feels awkward and lonely.

A tall woman – short blonde hair, angular face – makes her way over, arms overflowing with stacks of stapled booklets.

“Backstage,” Sophia says confidently, before the woman has time to ask.

“I'm Mrs Gibson,” the woman replies, busy rifling through her papers. “Lovely to have you on board. Here's all the information you'll need, there's a timetable on the back... if you miss more than four rehearsals, we'll have to ask you to drop out. Rehearsals are Monday and Thursday nights... I'm guessing you two are together – yes? – so I'll put you on the left wing for now. We're just doing a quick run-through today...”

Cara tunes her out, her gaze wandering, flicking across the walls and skipping between other students. And then her eyes trip over a figure, on the stage.

She stares for several seconds, heat flooding her cheeks. Beneath bright lights, in such a chaotic scene, he looks different. More – tangible. Slightly smaller. He’s laughing with a girl, midway through an animated discussion, and his presence is so jarring, she can only stare.

Sophia nudges her, eyebrows set in confusion, and Cara snaps out of her trance, ducking her head and turning away. Their last encounter is running through her mind on repeat. He’d seen her, she’s sure. Her fingers shake slightly.

“Coming?” Sophia asks, heading towards their assigned position. She looks back for Cara, who hasn’t moved.

“Yeah – I just ...” Cara grasps at words that won’t form quickly enough, mind skipping between excuses, unable to explain.

“Come on.” Sophia grabs her upper arm and pulls her across the room. Cara follows, face resolutely downcast. Sophia leads them off to the side, and Cara sits on the edge of a nearby stool. It’s almost awkward to look so far in the opposite direction from him, but she manages.

“Alright!” Mrs Gibson calls, clapping her hands together. Cara glances back reflexively. He’s midway through stretching, feet together, palms face down on the floor.

“Act three, scene one!”

In the commotion of a room full of people finding their places, a boy slips in beside Sophia. Their bodies touch in too many places to count, and Cara imagines Sophia can feel his breath. His fingertips play along her wrist, palm, and he says something so quietly Cara can’t hear. Sophia smirks, tilting her head back and glancing up at him, and his hands run along the hem of her school dress, and then he’s gone.

Music blooms in the air. Something quiet. A handful of scattered notes; hesitant. Conversations are reduced to whispers. Cara's still glancing around, curious about the speakers that must be close by, when he starts.

Arm extended, curved, leg raised and trembling, body inhaling in a moment that stretches... and he crumples, spinning across the polished floorboards. The music cascades, light and frothy, and he moves as if through water, eyes closed, curved from fingertip to toe, arms sweeping up and body bending to the side. Leg extended and hesitating, music morphing, notes hanging heavy in the air. His movements become stronger, quicker, body lashing out and spinning across the room, angles harsh and urgent, emotion contorting his face.

Whispers pervade the room; hastily continued conversations. Sophia fiddles with her hem. Mrs Gibson is consulting a sheet, and a couple of girls in the corner are still stretching. No one is staring. And Cara can't take her eyes off him.

The music, easing back into a light crescendo, is so soft. So gentle. It cradles him, like the cracked and raw shouting has been stabbing at him, and she never realised how soft the edges of his body could be, how his movements could ripple, how he could be even more beautiful in light than dark. Like he's been dancing to escape and now – now, he's free.

The music shifts; several more people dash on stage, and the scene morphs. He slows, eyes opening, and Cara glances away.

She and Sophia don't talk much. They're kept busy with various instructions to move things back and forth. Cara tries to concentrate on the play but she's caught between *looking* and *not looking*.

She needn't have worried. He doesn't so much as glance her way.

WEDNESDAY

Cara kicks her bag through the door that afternoon, key in one hand, phone in the other. She drags it through the entryway and past the kitchen –

And stops.

Glass glitters on the floorboards, shiny and wet. The smell of alcohol is thick in the air, heavy in her head already.

She sees the stem of a wine glass.

Tears rise instantly, bringing with them a wave of self-hatred, and she lurches towards the lounge room doorway.

The TV is on. Muted. Thick sunlight falls across the couch, spilling through open blinds. She can see the dark roots of Madeline's previously dyed-blond hair, head shoved up against the armrest. Asleep.

Cara's hands are shaking. The room feels like it's tilting and her eyes are blurry with tears. Automatically, she reaches for her wrists, digging fingernails into soft skin, anchoring herself to the pain. But it's not enough not enough not enough not

It's such a small thing, really. Shattered glass. Wine on the floor. It's nothing really. Only – her mum's unconscious on the couch, and she hasn't eaten all day, and she's been feeling hollow and strange and right now it's like everything inside her is breaking.

And then it *really* begins.

She stumbles to the kitchen, pulling wads of newspaper from boxes. Sobs rip through her chest and she kneels on the ground mopping up what she can and the crying gets stronger, harsher, and the newspaper is dripping half-wine half-tears.

She wraps the glass in an article about a politician. Blood stains the tip of the paper. A fresh cut on the edge of her palm. Searing pain - it gives her something to grab, something to hold on to, something to ground herself to.

Scrunching newspaper in her fist, sobbing hard, she feels that familiar tug towards her wrist, thoughts caught on the sharp edges of the broken glass. Muscles racked with tremors, head swimming, she kicks the newspaper into a corner and stumbles up the stairs, desperate to escape.

She only really makes it halfway. Her body folds against the wall, arms wrapped around her chest as if to hold herself together. Hair damp with tears and spit, face sore, headache mounting. She rests her forehead on her knees, the fabric of her school skirt cool against her hot skin.

She wakes there, cramped and stiff. Drowsy, she stands, the darkness disorientating. She stumbles up the last few stairs and somehow finds her bed.

THURSDAY ... AND FRIDAY ... SATURDAY, SUNDAY, MONDAY, TUESDAY, WEDNESDAY ...

School is jarringly normal. Nights pass like clockwork.

She falls into a rhythm.

Without any acknowledgement, Sophia falls into step beside her. They sit through English together, back of the classroom. Sophia doesn't seem to talk to anyone else, and no one talks to her. She meets her at the end of most classes, and when she doesn't, Cara figures out where to go.

They eat together. Sophia talks, and Cara listens.

Twice a week, they attend after-school rehearsals. The boy never so much at glances at her, but sometimes she thinks he must recognise her, must know she's there – in the way his eyes move, how he positions himself in the room. She's constantly lost in how he moves here, so alive and bright and *real*, so different to the figure locked in taut frustration in his backyard, caught in shadows and noise.

The longer she sits there, watching, moving props, the more Cara wonders about Sophia's *being* there. She seems out of place, entirely disinterested. Sometimes, boys watch her. Cara follows their eyes, the way their gaze traces the curve of her legs and gets stuck on the hem of her school dress.

It makes her uncomfortable, but Sophia seems to unfurl.

Cara becomes a pattern. An exterior presented to the world. Blank. Average. Normal.

She doesn't talk about Madeline, or home, or her old life. She doesn't really talk much at all. Sometimes she thinks she might forget how to.

Most nights, she watches him dance. When the muffled shouting begins, her stomach curls with anticipation. Watching him – it makes her feel like she can *feel* the blood in her veins, the breath in her lungs, the beats coursing through her heart. When it's her legs folded by the window, her nose tip almost pressed to the glass, her eyes vivid on him – her body must be worth something. Must be her own.

She never feels as in control as she does watching him.

Sometimes, he doesn't appear. Those nights, it's quiet, blessedly calm, and she sits on the ground in knots. Newspaper soaked in wine, glittering glass, sharp edges. She twists her hands, digs her fingernails into her skin.

Her thoughts chase themselves in circles, and she sits in silence.

THURSDAY

He's covered in bruises.

She stares, eyes tripping over the mottled green and blue patterns blooming across his skin, a bouquet of colour on his upper arms, bared by his loose black tank-top. He's self-consciously shrugging his jacket off, staring at the ground. As he looks up – not at her, never at her - she re-examines his face, noticing the shadow of his jawline, the tired limp of his eyes, and for a second it's hard to catch her breath.

Sophia kicks her leg.

"*Stop,*" she hisses.

Cara turns, refocusing on Sophia, automatically tugging her sleeves over her wrist.

"What? Did you see him?"

Sophia's rapidly pulling her hair back, combing her fingers through her tight black curls.

"*Yes,*" she hisses again, "*but for the love of god, don't stare. Honestly.*"

Out of the corner of her eye, Cara watches Mrs. Gibson approach him, attempt to talk. He shrugs her off, crossing the room. The teacher presses her hands together and bites her lip, but turns away. Several kids turn, stir, glance over for a second too long as he passes, but the majority of the room barely notices.

Sophia's still talking.

"Someone saw them – the bruises - a while ago. Last year, was it? I think they dragged him up to the councilor and everything. I don't know. It was just the biggest story we'd had for a while. Everyone thought it must be some family thing ... but apparently it's just karate, or kick-boxing or something. Or that's what I heard. I see him around at school, and he's fine, usually. Maybe just a tough class or something."

Karate? Kickboxing?

She can hear the shouting so clearly, imprinted in her mind. She's imagining heavy hands, gripping his forearms, squeezing, throwing, shoving.

"They look ... bad."

Sophia shrugs. "Tough sport."

She feels odd. Like something's been lifted, like since she fell asleep on the stairs everything's been hazy and quiet and now colour is vivid and sound is loud.

"What's his name?" she whispers.

"Um – Mitchell? No – wait, Mike, I think. Yeah. Michael."

That night, when the shouting starts, she tenses. She huddles in the window and waits, but he never comes. For a second, she thinks she might – should – do something. Grab her phone, call the police.

What would she say? *Sorry to bother you. Only there's this boy I watch dance in his backyard every night, and I think he might be hurt? Or need help?*

She has never associated him with the shouting itself, with what it must mean about him – his home, his family. She thinks of him dancing, the vulnerability and the emotion and the pain as he throws himself through the air. Or –

huddled in his own room. As stuck in the noise of his home as she is stuck in the silence of hers.

Needless to say, she doesn't call.

SATURDAY

Her phone is *ringing*.

She stares blankly at the object for a few seconds. Her room is dark, the silhouettes of furniture visible only by the light from the streetlamps outside, filtering through her window. She hadn't been able to find the energy to flick a light on, even as the sun receded.

Her phone is lit up and vibrating. An unknown number.

Snapping into motion, she picks it up. Slides her finger across the screen, presses it to her ear.

"Hello?"

Her voice surprises her. It echoes oddly in this room. Has she ever spoken aloud here?

For a second, she expects her dad's voice. *Stupid, really.* She would've recognised the number.

"Cara?"

"Sof?"

"You have to come get me." Sophia's voice is breaking, thick with tears. The connection is bad, crackling and breaking off sharply. There are voices in the background, loud music and laughter.

"What? What do you mean?"

"I need you to – you have to come – me."

"Sof? What's going on?"

"Please – ... fault – I said – *wanted* –" Her voice is incoherent, lost to the background noise and a crappy connection. Cara presses her phone harder to her ear.

"Sof? I can't hear you. Where are you? What's going on?"

"I'm so sorry," Sophia's saying, crying now, and Cara begins to understand the slur of her words, the high emotion. Patterns she used to notice in Madeline. Some party, too many drinks.

"Sof? Talk to me."

But the call's dead.

Biting her lip, Cara calls her back. It rings twice, and disconnects. She tries again. This time, straight to voicemail. Her fingertips dance across the keyboard.

Sof. Call me back, please.

Ten minutes later, a text lights up her phone.

I'm okay. Sorry. Don't worry.

MONDAY

Sunday, Cara calls twice and sends six texts. There's no response.

She's at school early, deliberately seeking Sophia out. She finds her leaning against a locker, chatting with a boy, eyes all fluttery. Cara recognises him instantly – the one from their first rehearsal. His face has stuck in her mind. She wonders if he's been there since – if he and Sof have been stealing moments, his fingertips light on her palm, fiddling with her hem.

Sophia catches sight of Cara, standing awkwardly in the middle of the busy hallway, sleeves hanging by her fingertips, and falters. Eyes snapping away, she whispers something to the boy, who nods and leaves, fingers lingering on her arm as he passes.

Cara approaches hesitantly, carefully planned speeches falling away, unable to grab a hold of any of them.

"Are you – alright?"

It sounds lame, even to her. Sophia rolls her eyes and turns away, opening her locker.

"I'm fine. What's your problem?"

"You never texted me back." Even Cara can hear the slight whine in her voice.

"I *told* you I was fine. And I got busy." Her locker's open, and she's rummaging for books.

“What was that call about?”

“*Nothing*. God, honestly. I said I was fine. Okay? Good. Perfect. Happy.” She turns to Cara, slamming her locker shut. “Just forget about it, alright?”

She walks away.

They meet up in English, third period. Cara’s been making sentences in her head all morning, putting concern into words. But Sophia meets her with a too-wide smile and airy voice.

Cara lets it go.

She stops by the IGA again that afternoon, after rehearsal. She makes choices based on discounts, conscious of the few notes and coins she scrounged together from Madeline’s bag. No strawberries this week, but two-for-one noodles.

The soft beeping of scanned barcodes is achingly familiar. She’s almost nine again, hand clutched in her father’s, watching the boxes and bags disappear down the conveyer line. The soft light preceding dusk pressed against the window, perfectly-wrapped chocolates lined up on the shelf before her. Even then, odd conversations tugging at her mind, the bottle Mum put in the trolley and Dad’s anger when he found it at the checkout.

She blinks.

She thinks the checkout boy might be from her year at school, but he doesn’t seem to recognise her.

It’s dark when she finds herself back outside in the carpark. People make their way around her, the automatic doors gliding open every few seconds.

She feels very lonely.

Her walk home is preoccupied, marked by thought. He didn't appear all weekend, though she'd waited every night. The expectation, almost *excitement*, she'd once associated with the shouting was gone.

Now it was white sound, the backdrop to anxious thoughts and heart-aching fears.

She'd watched him dance through rehearsal just an hour ago, bruises splotchy and faded, face flickering with pain when he moved too fast in one direction. She hadn't mentioned it again to Sophia, and she'd done her best not to stare.

That's what everyone else seemed to do, anyway.

She unlocks the door to her house, shoving her bag through and pushing it shut behind her. Making her way through the hallway, she's almost past the kitchen before her mind catches up with her eyes.

Madeline stands by the sink. Back to the bench, filling a glass from the tap. Water white and rushing and foaming.

Before Cara can think, can even consider escaping, the water's shut off and Madeline's turning.

Their eyes lock.

Bodies frozen. Opposite sides of the bench.

Silence. Long and ugly. And then –

“Run out of wine?” Cara's voice is loud, cruel. Nothing that could betray the shake in her hands, her toes curled and clenched.

Madeline says nothing, fingers white against the glass. She looks almost afraid. Cara's wondering if she has any recollection of that night at all – the broken glass, the soaked floorboards, the delicate stem and bleeding newspaper.

They're still. Eyes locked.

"Cara, I – "

Cara jerks away. She walks steadily from the room, past the kitchen, and the neatly piled boxes and empty cupboards, past the lounge room and row of smiling photos, and up each step of the stairs to her room.

She sits on her bed. Digs her fingernails into her palm. Focuses on the pain.

Shattered glass. Jagged edges. *Cara, I -*

She presses her fingernails into her wrist.

TUESDAY

When the shouting begins that night, she's undressing slowly before the long mirror on the front of her wardrobe.

She stares at the lines and curves of her body, the freckle-coated skin stretched over hip bones and shoulders, the indents of her collarbones, the arch of her thighs. She sees fat and folds and creases, and feels the hatred rise, strong and heavy.

She sees her skin. Netted and bound with thin scars, criss-crossing on the inside of her wrists and inner thighs.

It was never about the blood. Or the mutilation - at least at first. Just the pain.

When boys started taking notice of the way hair was styled, and the curve of a girl's leg, and the parting between her lips – Cara started noticing too. Like being in a state of hyper-awareness, dissecting appearances and annotating each way girls stood out in a way she didn't. *Olive skin. Thick eyebrows. White teeth. Slim knees. Narrow shoulders. Long stomach. Soft breasts.*

Like a spinning top in her head, going over and over and over again, every flaw and fault and mistake in her body and every perfection in the girl at the bus stop and every reason and way she could never be loved, should never be loved, spinning spinning spinning in her head until everything seemed out of her grasp and too far away and like she might just -

It was the pain. The pinching of skin - the softest skin, just below her wrist, or at the base of her neck. It snapped her back. Rooted her to the ground when her head was wrapped in anxiety.

And when it wasn't enough, when the marks faded and the pain only distracted her for a second, she dug harder. Deeper.

She feels sick at the sight of blood. Sick like the weight in her stomach when she passes a mirror, sick like the headache when she dithers between clothes because nothing feels like it fits right.

It's a trade-off. Knife on the skin, sliced open like peeling a peach. Red on white. A sickness in her stomach and white pain searing through her veins, rooting her to the moment. It's hard to think when it's like that.

They didn't scar, at first. She let them bleed, let them heal. Plenty of skin to go around, until her body ached unnaturally, curled in on itself, felt tingly and rubbery, and she had to learn how to take the blades from razors and hide them in the lining of her jacket pocket because she couldn't get through a day without it.

And then there was no time to heal. And she had to cut deeper. And when the skin knit together it didn't fade.

They shine silver under the right light.

She hasn't touched a blade since he left. She can't quite figure out why – only it makes her sick in a new way, just to touch one. The cold metal on her fingers makes her skin crawl and her throat close. Maybe it's because she wasn't good enough. Wasn't enough. Messed up too many times, and that's why he's gone.

She blinks, eyes snapping away from the mirror. A prickling rises between her shoulders, crawling up her neck. On instinct, before her mind even catches up, she drops to the floor, fingers scrambling for a top - something, anything. Clutching a long-sleeved shirt to her chest, she spins frantically to face the window, eyes desperately sliding across the backyard next door.

He's resolutely turned away, mid-way through stretching. His entire body is curved towards the stars and she can't help thinking he's offering himself to the sky. A deep blush blooms behind her ears. He saw her. She knows it, without any possible doubt. *He saw her.*

She feels exposed.

And alive.

And raw.

She backs away quickly, tugging the top over her head. And for a second, beneath the darkness of the stretched cotton, a tiny smile flickers on her lips.

WEDNESDAY

She thinks about it all day. Excitement tingles in her stomach, a feeling so foreign that at first she can't quite remember what it means.

It's lunchtime before she realises Sophia isn't even at school.

The shouting doesn't start that night. It's quiet. Peaceful. She can't quite bring herself to even feel happy for him. She texts Soph instead, who replies instantly.

I'm fine. Stop over-reacting.

THURSDAY

Sophia's absent again. The lunchroom is loud and crowded.

Some days everything still feels hazy and only half-real. Like she's underwater. Like being locked behind a glass wall and watching the world move on.

Rehearsal – the first without scripts - moves slowly. False starts and open mouths, dancers that stumble and singers that falter, actors glancing off to the side or at the back of their hands, inked with cues.

He never so much as looks at her.

She thinks about one of those very first nights, when she could've sworn they'd made eye contact; the boy and her. About the night before last, when she was so sure he had been watching her.

He'd never even glanced her way during all these hours, all these afternoons.

He *must* recognise her.

Or not.

Or he doesn't care.

Or he doesn't know.

Or she's making it all up inside her head.

Going crazy for real.

She stands abruptly, making some attempt at an apologetic face for Mrs Gibson. She walks, half runs, faster and faster until she's through the exit and out the building, standing in a courtyard brimming with golden, burning light.

Eyes squeezed shut, arms wrapped around her chest, breathing fast and hard. *Get a grip get a grip get a grip.*

The sky is all kinds of blue and yellow. She digs her nails into white skin. The scars on her wrist stand out against her veins. Straight and methodical. *Get a grip get a grip get a grip.*

FRIDAY

Sophia and Cara barely speak at lunch. Mostly, Cara watches. Sophia's eyes are liquid, lips chapped and swollen, hair disheveled (she's tied it back and let it loose repeatedly all day). She keeps glancing at a couple of boys – but they don't seem to notice.

Cara knows better than to ask, anyway.

A sharp ringing noise is echoing through the house. It takes a few seconds for her to realise it's the doorbell.

It's evening. Early. As she glances at the little clock on her nightstand, it ticks over to 6:41.

The doorbell is still ringing. Uncertain, she half-rises to her feet – and then it stops.

She pauses, kneeling on the bedroom floor. The front door opens, and voices drift up the stairs.

Cara stays still for another minute or so, listening hard. Two math books are spread before her, complete with layers of notes. It's quiet downstairs.

"Cara?"

The voice is thin, apprehensive.

"There's – there's food down here," Madeline calls. Muffled footsteps, and a door closes.

Silent, cautious, Cara climbs to her feet and slips out onto the landing.

She takes the stairs two at a time, lightly, and spots it immediately. In the kitchen, on the bench, are two plastic containers, one half-filled with rice and one with chicken satay sticks. Oil bleeds through a small paper bag – spring rolls.

Thai food. Their special-occasion dinner. Spring rolls, rice and chicken - her order.

Soft, muffled sounds of a TV spill from the next room. Cutlery clinks. Sitcom laughter.

She's hesitant. Is this a move? A message? A challenge?

But –

she really is hungry.

Unsure, she glances around for a plate, forgetting they're still packed neatly in a box somewhere.

Instead, she grabs the containers and the paper bag, stacking them in both hands and crossing back to the stairs, taking them two at a time. Just past the middle, she looks back into the lounge-room.

The TV is on, bright and in motion. Madeline is sitting up on the couch.

She studies while she eats. When peanut sauce floods her tongue, and flakes of spring roll escape her mouth, she has to work extra-hard to repress memories of home, and a worn, wooden dining table, and a house filled with possessions and warmth and memories and *family*.

But.

It's kind of okay.

He's there before the shouting even begins.

She sees the smudge of movement out of the corner of her eye, his backyard lit up as he slides the doors open.

Maybe it's the Thai food, warm in her stomach. Or the frustration with a boy who never looks at her. But she stands, fluid, and crosses to the mirror – aware, this time, of her position, framed in the window.

She examines her face. Large, pale eyes, thin wispy hair trailing down her back. Soft cheeks, narrow chin, long mouth. Child-like, alien. She touches her finger to her chapped lips, freckled nose, fuzzy ears. Hand brushes her throat, collarbone, shoulder.

She pulls her school shirt over her head, hair tumbling down, tickling her bare back. Slips her hands under her bra straps, sliding the elastic from her shoulders, twisting it around, fumbling with the clasp. A smoldering heat is building in her spine, and a shiver races across her skin. She can feel every nerve in her body, every touch magnified tenfold.

Her torso is pale and bare, dotted with freckles, collarbones prominent.

She unzips her school skirt, thumb brushing the length of her hip. The skirt puddles at her feet.

Every breath she takes makes her lungs shiver. Her blood buzzes beneath her skin.

She feels – she feels powerful. And sexy. And more than herself.

When she turns, nerves tight in her muscles, he’s facing the other way, engrossed in fluid movement.

But she knows.

SATURDAY

Her phone’s ringing again. She picks it up quickly, finger sliding across the screen.

“Cara?”

“Sof?”

She remembers their last call vividly. Tears and noise, a party she never heard about, a girl who never explained.

“Can we go somewhere?”

They end up at the beach. Cara’s never been anywhere other than school, and she follows Sof down streets she doesn’t know, cracked pavement and white picket fences.

Suburbia.

The air is cool, but the sun is bright, and teenagers dot the long stretch of sand, clustered densely down by the pier. Girls clad in bikinis recline close by. Cara fidgets with her light long sleeve. They walk further,

rounding the far left of the beach, picking their way over a wide, piled-together stretch of broad rocks. Cara feels awfully young, watching her footing, lost in concentration.

They sit down, picking a rock close to the ocean. Seconds pass in silence, and then minutes. The ocean rushes in and slides back. Clouds drift across the sun. A seagull hovers in the air.

Sophia's silent, mute, and Cara feels she should say something, and then she feels she *has* to say something, has to talk about it, has to -

"My dad left us."

Eyes fixed on the sea.

"He had an affair with our doctor. She used to give me lollipops when I was a kid."

Cara bites her lip, and then, like she can't stop herself, words just keep tumbling out.

"I don't know – I don't know when he told my mum. It might have been... there were a couple of nights they wouldn't talk to each other, wouldn't look at each other. They weren't talking much anyway – I just remember it was so – quiet.

"And then I came home from school one day and he was just – gone. A letter on the kitchen bench, telling me mum had kicked him out, that he was sorry, that he wanted to see me, that he was – he was leaving the *country* for this job and she – *she* was going with him.

"But it was like – clothes gone, office empty, his – his favourite freaking cereal gone. Like he hadn't even *existed*. It was – it was ridiculous. How can you just erase ...?"

"I haven't – he used to call a lot. I never picked up and eventually he just ... stopped. And it's not that... I just – I don't hate him. I hate him for leaving like that. I hate him for what he did. But I don't – I don't hate him. I just think – there's no coming back, from that. That's it."

Sophia's quiet for a couple of seconds, fingers jumping to her hair, absentmindedly pulling it back, tightening the angles of her face. The ocean fills the void in the conversation.

"My sister died." She says it matter-of-factly, still twisting her hair back, fumbling for an elastic. It might have come out competitively, or attention-seeking. But it doesn't.

"It was a few years ago. She was 15. I was 13."

Cara can taste salt on her lips. They're cold. Chapped. Shock pulses through her.

She exhales.

"Do you miss her?"

A quiet breath.

"Do you miss your dad?" Sophia asks instead.

"Yeah." The soft word almost gets lost in the rush and roar of the ocean.

There's several heartbeats of silence.

"I'm too much," Sophia nearly whispers. "That's what everyone says. I go a bit crazy. I can't figure out what's stupid. Or dangerous. Everything seems fine and I can't figure out where the line is. Nothing ever feels like enough. I have this therapist, and he keeps telling me I'm over compensating. For my sister. But - like - what the fuck does that even *mean*?"

Waves break. Ocean spray hits the rocks. They're both staring straight ahead, but everything feels ... open.

"Why did you come up to me, that first time?"

“Because no one really wants to be around me anymore. There was all ... *that* ... going on, and then I hooked up with someone’s boyfriend. Word gets around. But you were the new kid. You seemed quiet. Shy. Lonely. Because my therapist likes to say I’m self-destructive and you looked like – like you wouldn’t run the moment you got scared. I don’t know, I think I need that.”

Heartbeats of silence.

“Madeline – I mean – my mum...” Cara begins, unsure. “I think it was about running, for her. She couldn’t ... face anyone. All her friends were married couples, you know? Perfect families. She said it was the mortgage... after he left there were a lot of bills on the table ... but I know why we had to leave, really.”

Several breaths pass.

“I’ve only said four words to her since we moved here,” Cara whispers. The words curl and twist in the sea-spray soaked air, echo in her head, thick with malice and hate. *Run out of wine?* Madeline, small and alone in the kitchen, clutching the glass of water.

“Are you angry at her?”

Cara examines herself. She peers at the bits and pieces of someone she used to know inside and out.

“No.” The word comes out as an exhale. Seeped in odd understanding, relief. “I’m not. I feel sorry for her. But I feel sorry for me, too, you know?”

The ocean rushes and roars and their clothes begin to stick to their skin, the salt drying on their faces.

“Yeah. I miss her. I do,” Sophia finally says, exhaling. “She just ... she drowned. She was on this surf camp. Just doing what she loved. Five day trip with all her friends. And she never came back.”

Silence tinges the air again. Cara grabs for Sophia’s hand, white on black, and that’s how they sit.

It doesn't really explain everything. But it's a piece of the girl who calls her, drunk and crying. The girl who skips school and looks at boys like she's scared.

The ocean surges beneath them.

"There's scars, on your wrist," Sophia says softly. Warmth floods Cara's cheeks, and she stiffens. "You're always wearing long sleeves, but I see them, you know."

A heavy pause. Cara opens her mouth, but Sophia interrupts.

"No, it's alright. I get it. I – I understand, more than you think. But I just wanted to – I don't think they're about your dad, or whatever else is going on with your family. They're – it's just, it's about you, I think. Trust me."

Cara exhales. The air is cool on her fingers, palms, wrist. She's silent.

The ocean crashes against the rocks again and again, until the spray is making them shiver. They clamber unsteadily to their feet.

SUNDAY

She lies on the bedroom floor in the afternoon, discarded school books somewhere by her head. The sun's close to setting, shadows long and lazy outside, walls glowing orange. She stares at the ceiling as the light recedes.

What is better? she wonders. His parents, the bruises on his arms, and a household locked in perpetual shouting - or her mum unconscious on the couch, the photos of her dad on the sideboard, the empty boxes and utter emptiness of her house.

She never can decide.

MONDAY

Rehearsal runs overtime – the last before they open at a local theatre. Home late, Cara opens the door in the dark, kicking her bag inside.

She flicks on lights as she goes – hallway, kitchen, stairs – and pauses.

The loungeroom light is on - out of character. She hesitates in the doorway.

She's never been in this room before. It's a bubble of space occupied by Madeline, as if closed off from the rest of the house. She's trained her eyes to slide over the doorway, to remove the room from her line of vision. If this room – and everything in it – doesn't exist, it's easier to believe in a sense of normality.

It's quite a nice room, really. She steps further inside, twisting her head. The ceilings are high, white and airy. Large, wide windows are set into the far wall, facing out into the front yard. Venetian blinds cover the dark glass.

Their family couch is in the center of the room, slightly askew, facing a blank wide-screen TV. Empty wine bottles are lined up neatly on the ground. Madeline is fast asleep, head on two throw cushions shoved against the arm rest, feet and legs awkwardly curled at the end. Cara steps closer, close enough to touch, and closer again, until she stands just by Madeline's head. She kneels slowly.

The couch is a dark blue, soft and worn. There's a stain on one of the cushions from when she was four or five – leaned against the fabric, temporary tattoo just applied. She used to sit on this couch and watch cartoons in her long Chinese pajamas every Saturday, because that was the only day she was

allowed to watch TV in the morning. On the Saturday's when her dad had to go into the office, she would abandon her position to chase his car down the street as he left, all the way to the corner.

Madeline's hair is growing out.

She had dyed it blonde for longer than Cara could remember, but she hadn't since he left - months now. Her roots are so dark they're nearly black, and almost to her chin. Close up, her hair is thin, dry and damaged. Cara exhales softly, and Madeline's eyes open.

They stare at each for several seconds, nearly on a perfect eye level.

Cara grabs Madeline's hand.

"Come on."

She leads her to the bathroom, grabbing a pair of kitchen scissors someone had unpacked weeks ago. She flicks on the fluorescent light and seats Madeline on the lid of the toilet.

"Stay still," she whispers.

Carefully, steadily, she takes a thick strand of hair between her fingers, and closes the scissors just below where dark meets blonde. A finger-width of hair falls, spreads across the bathroom floor.

She snips again.

By the time she's finished, a ring of hair surrounds them. Cara guides Madeline to her feet, to the mirror over the sink. They're nearly the same height; their reflections peering back at them. Madeline's hair stops just below her chin now, the tips still tinged with blonde.

When she was little, Cara would sit on Madeline's bed at night, watching her read. She'd crawl up close to her head and play with her hair, entranced by the dark roots when they were growing out. *Why do you make your hair different?*

“To look more like you baby, because you’re so beautiful!” Madeline would say, twisting around to plant a kiss on her nose, or leg, or tummy.

Cara doubts it was true. But they look alike now, though their hair is different, and where Cara is pale, Madeline is olive. There’s something in the set of their faces, the hollows beneath their eyes.

They might be sisters.

Madeline raises a worn hand to her hair, fingers brushing the tips. She doesn’t seem quite there.

But then, she doesn’t seem too far away, either.

TUESDAY

Sophia disappears at lunch. Says she’s going to the bathroom and comes back with chapped lips and frizzy hair, mascara smudged and school dress messy.

Usually, they spend lunch at the back of the school. A tree and a patch of grass. Long, curving branches that split the sky above and litter the ground with round, hard gum nuts. They sit in the spaces between the exposed roots, talking and sometimes not talking. When Cara closes her eyes, the laughter and voices drifting on the breeze sound almost like home.

Sophia sits down next to her. Skin flushed.

“Where have you been?” Cara’s pulling up fistfuls of grass.

“I told you, didn’t I? Bathroom.”

Automatically defensive. Sophia pulls the elastic from her hair to let it fall loose, only to gather it back up again. Cara’s stomach twists a little.

“You don’t have to do that,” she says quietly. Sophia’s face and hands go still.

“Do what?”

“Lie to me. Pretend like – like I’m stupid, like I don’t know. I’ve seen how boys look at you – like you’re this thing, this possession – and you act like you *love* it. It’s not *fine*.”

Deep breath. But she can’t stop now.

“You - you throw yourself around like you’re worthless, but *I* think you’re worth something, and it’s just a big fuck you to me, then, isn’t it?”

It just comes pouring out, frustrated and fast.

“You get scared and you run straight for the nearest risk, anything that’ll make you forget - whether it’s the first boy who’ll fuck you or the first – first thing that’ll make it all numb, you’re terrified of facing something *real*, something – something that hurts.”

She’s breathing quickly, and Sophia’s face is cold, set like stone. Her hair drifts across her face, and she shifts to the side, away from Cara ever so slightly.

Silence. And then Sophia takes a deep breath.

“I was - I was the kid with the dead sister. For nearly a whole year, that was my *identity*. No one could look at me without seeing her. I couldn’t have a conversation without hearing her name.

“But I started – people started inviting me to these parties, because when you’re the kid with the dead sister ... you’re *interesting*. I was getting all this – this attention, from this group of people I’d never even talked to before. It was just her name that mattered – just her. She - used to be pretty cool, I guess. No one even knew I existed.

“And I was just so sick of everything, and I thought *fuck it*. It was some house party, a Friday night. And I ended up having sex with this guy, and the next morning – it was a Saturday, but everyone already knew. He must’ve texted everyone, the whole freaking school. And I was – I was 14.”

Tears are streaming down her face, but her voice barely shakes.

“It was ... something she’d never done. And now it was something she never *could* do, but I had, and it meant that ... just like that, I’d gone somewhere she never could. She’s my big sister, but ... it was suddenly different. It distanced us.

“When I got back, that Monday, everyone was talking about it, but it had nothing to do with *her*. I was being called a slut and a whore but it *wasn’t about her*. And that’s all that mattered. It was like getting a bit of myself back. Like I could finally just be me again.”

Sophia’s shaking, trembling.

“And you – you have no idea – you’re just this kid from the city with a messed up family, but there’s thousands of you out there and you sit here so – so - self-righteously telling me I’m *scared*, but you’re not going to tell me a single thing I didn’t already fucking know. Of course I’m scared, I’m scared of being her again, I’m scared of losing *me*, of being just another kid with a sad story, because I’m not. I don’t want people to see her when they look at me, I don’t – I don’t want them – to - “

She’s sobbing, words broken and clinging to her tears, shattering in her mouth. Cara’s still, shocked into silence, guilty but grateful, and she makes a grab for Soph’s wrist. White on black. She’s thinking of Sophia dragging her through a streaming crowd, her fingertips warm, the world blurry and rushing past them. Their skin damp from sea-spray. Boys fiddling with her dress hem.

“*I see you*. I have only ever seen you, Soph. I. Only. See. You.”

They sit. Seconds stretch like hours, moments passing between sobs, lost in the noise of a high school playground.

"I'm sorry. Oh godi'msosorry," Sophia gasps.

Her crying slows, eventually. Stops. Awkwardly, Cara draws her hand back, and they sit side by side in silence. A little too far apart.

It's not a cold silence, exactly. Something's just - shifted. Like they don't need to talk. Like they kind of understand, but there's nothing to say.

The bell rings.

As she rises to her feet, Cara can't help but think they're more alike than they know. Both surrounded by silence and absence, but where Cara gets quieter, Sof gets louder. Meets boys in bathrooms and drinks until she can't remember why she's even there.

When the boy from the backyard looks at her, Cara feels like more than herself. When boys look at Sophia, it feels like standing before a judging panel.

WEDNESDAY

She's by her mirror when the shouting begins. Doesn't falter, even as light floods his backyard. senses his presence, and slides elastic over skin.

She feels his gaze like tiny shivers clinging to her skin, like something that could set her whole body alight. She is so endlessly fascinated with him, and that he could look at her like she looks at him, look at her and see something worth looking at again, and again and again –

It makes her like freckles and pale skin and hip bones that stick out.

Her breath catches. Movements steady, she pulls a clean shirt over her head. When she turns, she's sure she catches his eye for a second as he turns away.

Her skin is warm. She feels more in control than she ever has before.

THURSDAY

Cara ends up walking to the local theatre. It takes the better part of an hour, and when she finally slips through the little side-stage door, Sophia is frantic, grabbing her arm and dragging her backstage.

Opening night.

They hide awkwardly in the curtains, presented with a sliver of the stage, just enough to recognise their cues to remove and change the scenery and props. There are layers of curtains, several of them, and somewhere along the way Sophia disappears from view.

The scene is drawing to a close – the last one before intermission – and Cara hears the line she's listening for, darting forward as the stage falls into darkness, grabbing a chair and hurrying off.

Sophia doesn't appear. Confused, Cara ducks through a curtain, and slips around the next one.

She knows him instantly – the boy from rehearsal. His lips are on Sophia's neck, his hands tight on her shoulders, and Cara can see Sophia's face just above his collarbone – blank. Still.

Their eyes lock.

He must sense Sophia stiffen, because he breaks away, glancing behind him, hands still on her skin.

They lock eyes. Lazily, he looks Cara up and down, eyes roaming her body, a smirk dangling on his lips.

The air is hazy and thick with hairspray and artificial smoke, and the boy turns away carelessly, grabbing Sophia's upper arm, tugging her away.

Sophia hesitates, for a second.

And follows.

He leads her out of the curtains, brushing past Cara.

She's frozen in the darkness. Bites her lip, twists her hands together. Her fingernails find the soft skin of her wrist – and stop.

She spins around and takes off after them, heading for the long corridor that connects both wings of the stage. Rounding the corner, she sees them immediately, dressed in shadows and silence.

She steps closer. Quietly. Unsure if she wants to be seen or not.

His lips are on her neck again, edging further down, and Sophia is pressed up against the wall, her hands at the hem of her school dress, tugging it down.

"No," she says, and Cara stops.

"No – wait," she's saying quietly, one hand at her hem, one hand on his shoulder, but his hands wrap around her arms and pin them back. He never looks up.

“Wait – stop – no, I said *stop*,” Sophia’s insisting, struggling harder.

Cara takes several more steps forward, close enough now that the dim over-head fluorescent lighting catches at her skin, and Sophia’s eyes flick towards her.

They stare at each other for a full second. Soph’s eyes widen, and she shakes her head jerkily, almost imperceptibly.

Cara falters. Hesitates.

But he must sense her presence, because he breaks away, turns around. His face tightens as he sees her. Letting go of Sophia, he steps forward. Grabs Cara’s wrists.

“Get out of here,” he spits. His grip is tight, heavy, painful, and already she can feel her hands going numb, and his mouth is opening again, and it’s like he’s already shoved her back and she’s already turned away and she already *hasn’t done anything* and *Sophia was shaking her head* and –

Sophia hasn’t moved. Dress still hitched up her thighs. Back to the wall, limp arms at her side, hair scrawled across her face.

Cara thrusts her knee up between his legs, wrenching her hands away as he doubles over. She steps around him, grabbing at Sophia’s arms and stumbling backwards, twisting around. The boy is groaning, and Sophia glances back.

“*Fucking bitch*,” Cara hears him spit. She doesn’t look back.

They stand in the curtains in silence. Music soaks the air, quiet and aching.

“I didn’t need your help,” Sophia whispers.

Cara glances at her, but in the dim, smoky air, her face is unreadable. At a loss, Cara opens her mouth to say something - apologise -

“But thank you,” Sophia whispers.

Several seconds of silence.

“I know you didn’t,” Cara says quietly.

Outside, a storm of applause begins.

Intermission is a whirlwind half hour. The cast is colorful and alive, eating and laughing and talking non-stop, and Cara and Sophia escape after the first five minutes, preferring the cool darkness between the heavy curtains. The audience moves around outside, stretching their legs and voices, and for a while they only listen.

“Sof?”

“Mm?”

“Why did you really sign up for this?”

Sophia smiles.

“Extra credit for drama. I had to make it up somehow – I’ve been failing that class all semester.”

Cara laughs.

It feels good.

“He’s getting out, you know,” Sophia says suddenly, hands gathering back her unruly hair. Intermission’s over - the curtains raised, audience back in place and cast on stage.

“What?”

Sophia exhales.

“Him,” she says, tilting her head towards the stage on their left. Michael is spinning across it, loose long sleeves, body taut with passion and energy, sweat glistening beneath the harsh stage lights.

“He graduates this year. But I heard he’s got some scholarship, some fancy dance school all the way across the country.”

Cara doesn’t say anything.

“God, I hate this town,” Sophia says quietly. “I’m gonna go somewhere far away. Where no one knows about *her*, right? And it won’t matter. It’ll just be me.”

On stage, Michael is bowing. Thundering applause rolls through the tiny speakers.

“Shit. That’s our queue,” Sophia says, and they scramble to their feet.

Cara’s home late that night after the long walk home. She steps inside, startled to find the hallway lights on. Carefully, she closes the door behind her.

The kitchen opens up on her right. Madeline is stacking plates in a long drawer, a box open by her feet. Heavily creased newspaper litters the floor, and a glass half-full of dark wine sits on the bench.

For a second, Cara's throat thickens. Smashed glass, red stains.

But it passes.

Madeline straightens, turns, and catches sight of her, standing motionless on the other side of the bench.

"Cara? Where have you been?"

"Um – production? Opening night?"

"Oh," Madeline picks up the wine glass, fiddling with the stem. "You didn't say."

"Right. Well. Yeah." It's hard to inform an unconscious woman of your evening plans.

Several heartbeats of silence.

"If you need – I mean, I could drop you off tomorrow. If you want me to," she says quietly.

Cara's not quite sure how to respond. Madeline hesitates, placing the wine glass back down. She looks as if she might say something – but she only turns back to another box.

For several seconds, Cara's still. Slowly, she turns away, and heads down the hallway to the base of the stairs. She pauses, and peers into the lounge room.

For a moment, everything looks the same.

And then - the photos. The family photos, lined up on the long TV unit.

Face down. Every one of them.

Cara closes her bedroom door behind her.

Her boxes are still stacked by the wall. Her wardrobe doors stand open, clothes spilling across the floor. Empty bookshelf, mattress askew on the floor, schoolbooks spread along the ground.

It's hollow. Fake. A set. A backdrop to an in-between, a life playing out in non-existence.

She rips the packaging tape from the cardboard.

Later, when a record player sits on the floor, and the bookshelf overflows with books, and ribbons of tape litter the carpet - she ends up in front of the wardrobe, facing her mirror and examining her face, the edges of her body. She pulls her shirt up and over her head, and for a second, she doesn't see skin or scars or fat or freckles. She sees - *Cara*.

Light floods the backyard next door.

With a steadying breath, she turns away from the mirror, and stands carefully in the window.

He's there, of course. He's looking straight at her.

It's the first time they've ever made eye contact for longer than it takes to glance away.

Slowly, she slides her bra straps from her shoulders, elastic down her waist. Her skin is warm and soft, blushing as she releases clips and lets straps fall away. Clothing puddles at her feet, and she stands in the window frame.

He doesn't laugh; smile; look away. He just stares.

Her head has never been so clear. This moment is full and entire and she can feel every heartbeat, every second, with this sharpness she knew only as the coolness of a metal blade, the pulse of pain.

She can feel the stiff carpet beneath her feet. The draft on the back of her legs. The warmth behind her ears. And they never break eye contact, only stare, the seconds lengthening, like the whole world just goes quiet. Falls away.

I only see you.