

Saturdays

“Stop thinking about it, Allie.”

Every inch of me ached to forget about this afternoon entirely, and yet, that didn't appear to be on my mind's agenda. As Tyler drove between the rows of skyscrapers, not at all fazed by the city lights or the heavy traffic, my feet drummed a sporadic rhythm against the floorboard of the car. I tried my best to soak in the sensation of wind blowing through my hair as we cruised with the top down, but my anxiety was getting the better of me. The lo-fi rock music playing on the radio wasn't doing much to help, but I knew how much Tyler loved it, so I kept my mouth shut.

Austin always seemed much more vibrant to me in the nighttime. Maybe that was true of all cities, but I wouldn't know. My traveling experience was limited to the central Texas area, not counting the few times I've been to rural El Paso to visit my great aunt. I mean, sure, I've seen Houston, Dallas and San Antonio now and again as well, just never at night, and only from out the window of my mom's minivan. As depressing as it may sound, I was never upset by my lack of worldliness. From what I gather, Austin isn't the worst place in Texas to get stuck in, not by a long shot.

When we rolled up to a stop light, Tyler poked me in the side and gave me a pitying half-smile, “Are you feeling any better?”

That was a good question. I thought about it for a moment, then decided that, no, I wasn't. Even though I knew no one was paying any attention to us, it felt as if every passerby was shooting daggers my way. I took a deep breath. My feet stopped tapping.

“I’ll be okay,” was the answer I ended up opting for. It wasn’t a lie—at least I hoped not—but it wasn’t the whole truth, either.

Tyler just nodded. On any other Saturday night, I’d be nagging him to ‘fess up as to where we were heading off to, and he’d remain tight lipped yet visibly amused, as was tradition. Tonight wasn’t like that. Before last month, I guess I just never knew how good I had it. I was stupid enough to think being poor made me a victim of something; fate, maybe. Whenever things went south, I’d chalk it up to the bad hand I’d supposedly been dealt in life. Hindsight is twenty-twenty.

Tyler cleared his throat, “You’re not hungry, are you?”

“I don’t think I can eat,” I admitted, “not yet.”

He put his hand on my knee and squeezed. Sometimes, Tyler proved to be even more amazing than I thought humanly possible. Three weeks ago, after the fallout, a lot of my other friends made it clear that they didn’t want to be seen with me anymore, and I didn’t protest. So when Tyler’s 1964 Cadillac Eldorado pulled up to the curb next my family’s townhouse on the Saturday of that very same week, like it was any other evening, saying I was floored doesn’t begin to cover it.

My Saturday nights have been dedicated to Tyler since sophomore year. Before graduating high school, we want to do every single thing there is to do in Austin. Come rain or shine, he’s always been the guy waiting outside my front door, eager to surprise me with our next excursion.

Tyler once told me that nothing would sway him from completing our mission. Turns out he wasn't lying.

After we broke away from the city traffic, Tyler turned onto a familiar gravel road. As the pathway widened, the kayak rental dock came into view. Next to the otherwise vacant parking lot, a bored looking teenager was rearranging a haphazardly compiled stack of lifejackets. I sent a weary glance Tyler's way.

"Relax, I doubt he'll recognize you. He looks pretty stoned."

Even though Tyler was probably right, I still crossed my arms protectively around my abdomen as we parked the car and approached the dock.

"We'll take a double kayak," Tyler told the guy at the register. I could hear my heartbeat raging in my ears. He glanced between the two of us a few times, then shrugged.

"Cash or credit?"

Once we were out on the water, my paranoia started seeping away. We stopped paddling and floated under the stretch of highway that ran above Town Lake, listening as cars zipped towards the downtown area. Tyler sat in the flimsy kayak seat behind my own, with his legs serving as sufficient arm rests on either side of me. We hadn't talked during the trip over, but I didn't mind. It felt like all I'd done these past few days was talk, or cry. I'm not sure I had the capacity for either activity anymore. Not for a while, at least.

“Hey,” Tyler rested his palm over my shoulder, “I know it doesn’t count for much, but I don’t blame you for... not blaming him.”

And just like that, my hands began to shake again. I didn’t have the first clue how to continue the conversation he’d started. So I figured I would try the truth, “But I do blame Nate. Of course I do. Who else is there to pin it on? It’s not like I believe in God anymore, so I can’t blame Him.”

Tyler shifted and the entire kayak moved with him, “But that verdict, you can’t be okay with that, can you?”

“No,” my answer came as a whisper even though I meant it to be a statement, “he’s my brother. I’m not allowed to be okay with something like that. It wouldn’t be right.”

During the long silence in between our words, I took the time to look out at the horizon, where the dark water met the even darker sky. The moon was full enough to catch a glint off of the occasional ripple created by a renegade fish, but otherwise, it felt like we were one plastic boat away from being swallowed whole by the night.

“How long does he have?”

I shrugged, “I don’t know. Probably years.”

“You always hear about people finding peace or whatever while they’re... waiting,” Tyler was really trying, and I appreciated it. “So there’s that.”

“He used to be fine. It’s not like he was always weird, or dangerous. I would’ve noticed. He didn’t spend his childhood killing small animals or taking notes during horror films. We rode our bikes around the neighborhood together every weekend. It wasn’t until a few months ago that he started isolating himself. He even asked my mom to call him by his full name, instead of just Nate. I should’ve known.”

Tyler sighed, and it tickled the back of my neck, “Anything could’ve triggered it. It’s not like you were supposed to keep tabs on him.”

“It makes me sick, Ty. My brother’s being taken to death row as we speak. When the judge read the verdict this afternoon, it finally set in.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong. You can’t control his choices.”

I was glad I didn’t have to meet Tyler’s eyes. With him behind me, I could more easily pretend I was speaking to myself, “I know, I know. But it still haunts me. My brother chose to be a goddamn school shooter. How am I supposed to walk down the halls anymore? Everyone watches me. It’s awful.”

More silence. I felt bad for asking Tyler a question I already knew there was no answer to. The only thing I could do was suck it up, if not to save face, then at least to save my parents

some grief. They couldn't afford to homeschool me or transfer me elsewhere. If going to Clermont High even after what Nate did was what it would take to help maintain their sanity, I'd stick to it in a heartbeat.

"I keep hearing about Nate on the local news. The anchors typically open with, 'Three dead and five in critical condition' at the beginning of the segment. But that isn't what really happened, it's just a statistic. Being there, hearing the noise, seeing the injured, the dead, and then realizing the chaos caused was by your own flesh and blood, that's what really happened. My brother killed three people. And now he's going to die, and I don't know how to stop wishing he weren't. I wish... I wish..."

My feet were cold, and I regretted taking my shoes off. I focused all my feeling on them to avoid breaking down. I was so tired of losing my mind over this. The entire city hated me and my family. At night I thought about the kids whose lives were ended by my brother. Sometimes I'd get out of bed just to stare at his door, but the only one who ever went in there was my mom. She spent entire afternoons sobbing into Nate's pillow. Whenever that happened, I would take a walk, and my dad would head back to his office for a few hours. It was unsettlingly nauseating to hear, and too hard to just ignore.

"You wish what, Allie?"

More than anything, I wanted to forget. Life wasn't perfect before, but I definitely wasn't painfully aware of what it felt like to struggle with anything more than mediocre grades and

money problems. Ignorance was bliss. When Nate and I were kids, I would tell our parents how much I hated him all the time. He was my big brother, and he'd do things like pull on my hair and call me ugly. Stuff that didn't actually matter. What I thought was hate then was only momentary contempt. Real hatred was what I felt for him now, and all I wanted was to be unfamiliar with that feeling again.

Our kayak hadn't tipped over, but I felt as if I was drowning in the inky black water as I stared down at it, "I wish it was just a statistic to me, too. I wish I didn't know what really happened."