

**PILOTS, ANGELS**  
**AND OTHER FALLING OBJECTS**

(excerpt)

**K. J. Howe**

**PILOTS, ANGELS, AND OTHER FALLING OBJECTS**

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*pilots, angels  
and other falling objects*

**K. J. Howe**

*Gravity is working against me  
And gravity wants to bring me down.*

—John Mayer

# 1

The highway sign looms large in our windshield: MAGIC 2 MILES. And I have to close my eyes for a moment, remind myself that it's just a place, a nowhere town in the middle of Nebraska.

Neither of my parents seems to notice it. They wouldn't. Maybe because we've been in such desperate need of something magical for so long, something wonderful and inexplicable and wholly unexpected, that the whole idea of anything good happening to us no longer has any meaning. Nobody's going to come along and wave a wand over our heads: *Presto chango. All your problems suddenly...DISAPPEAR!*

It just doesn't happen that way.

White sky winks through a hole in the metal, directly above the first *I*. Like someone reached out to dot it with a twenty-two caliber pen. Then it's gone.

I watch it fall away behind us, lose it in the greasy sweat of burnt oil and road grime coating our back window. Even the thunderstorm outside of Omaha yesterday hadn't completely erased the WASH ME somebody had smeared on the glass. A bit smudged now, but still legible. I'd watched the boys from our booth in the St. Louis Denny's, a pack of them prowling the parking lot at dusk, smoking and swearing, breaking bottles in the gathering husk of night. I was relieved that they'd vanished by the time we were finished eating. They felt out of control, like a storm brewing.

Then, last night, while we slept at the Tumbleweed, someone had crossed out the W and added TR.

How could Dad not see that? How could he not get all pissed off and go squeegee it away? It's like he refuses to see anything behind us: the smoke belching out of the tailpipe, the past we can't outrun. Like it's not even there. Except it is.

"Magic?" I ask. "Really?"

I sigh at the window, but the window soaks it up. The growl of the engine and the whine of the wheels on the highway swallow my frustration. The radio murmurs incoherently. Nothing can dislodge the heavy silence that's fallen back over us since we passed the wreck miles back.

"Why the hell would they name a town Magic?"

Dad's head jerks up. He glances in the rearview mirror. Just his dead eyes. They don't tell me what he's thinking.

"I said—"

"Madison!" Mom finally snaps. "Please. I have a headache." She uses that voice of hers, sighs, like the promise she made five minutes ago not to yell anymore was a joke. I knew she wouldn't be able to last. "And I wish you wouldn't swear."

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“What swear? I didn’t swear.”

“You said hell.”

“The hell I did.”

“Mad,” Dad says. His voice is a whisper. For a moment I think I see a flicker of life in his eyes—amusement, maybe, though it’s probably fear, I can’t be sure—but then it’s gone. “That’s enough.”

My stomach cramps up. I look out my window and try to decide if I’m premenstrual or just hungry. Maybe it’s an ulcer. Can you get ulcers as a teenager? Or maybe it’s liver disease. No, not liver disease.

I close my eyes, picture a calendar in my head and count the days. Eleven, so it’s not hormones. Guess I’m just hungry. Which makes me wonder if maybe I’m losing it, being hungry right after seeing those body bags along the side of the road. That’s not a normal response, is it? Even after we’d convinced ourselves none of it had been as bad as we’d thought it was.

Nobody speaks for a while. The road noise seems to grow louder with each passing mile. My stomach growls. It’s just after nine in the morning, not even close to lunchtime, and yet, here I am starving.

MAGIC POP 81

I notice that this one has a few more bullet holes through it. Then:

HIGHWAY ADOPTED AND MAINTAINED BY JIMBO MORALES, CERTIFIED SEPTIC ENGINEER

“Nebraska’s got sewer guys fixing highways?” I say. “What’s up with that?”

“Do what?” Dad says, raising an eyebrow.

“That sign. It said—” But then I give up. Why bother?

“Are we going to take a break? You said we’d stop.”

The powdered mini donuts at the hotel this morning had been as dry as sawdust. *Mini-Os!* More like *Mini-Uh-ohs*. I think they expired the last time Pluto was a planet.

“Viffiz diffguztig,” I’d said to Dad, half joking, trying to lighten the atmosphere a little. God knows things were a bit too serious. After washing the donut down with milk that tasted like it had come out of a can from the fifties and had a strange metallic aftertaste to it, I’d said, “Tastes like dryer lint.”

“That’s breakfast, Mad.” We’d barely been up an hour, and yet he already sounded exhausted. After Mom’s meltdown last night, he was on edge. He’d been avoiding her. We both were. “Just eat it and quit complaining so we can get back on the road.”

Ouch. I’d thrown the donut in the trash and kept my thoughts about the milk to myself.

Of course, now I wish I’d kept it because it feels like my stomach’s digesting itself from the inside out.

“Time for a pee break?” Dad asks.

I roll my eyes. *Christ on a cracker.*

“What?” He gives me a faint smile, crinkles in the corners of his eyes. “Sorry, honey. If you’re hungry, get something out of the bags back there.”

Yeah, just what I need, more processed junk food. What’s the saying? A minute on the lips, a lifetime on the hips. Not that anyone’s noticing my hips.

Another sign passes: MAGIC NEXT 3 EXITS

Three exits for eighty-one people. How can such a small a town need so many ways to get there from the highway?

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The sign hurries past, just as quickly as it came. Bumper stickers plastered all over the back. ‘*KCRO, AM 660. Bottom of your dial!*’ The words are faded and the paper is shredded by shotgun pellets, fluttering as we pass. Daylight shines through the holes, stars twinkling in the middle of the day. I don’t remember the signs in southern Missouri being as well ventilated as the ones here.

*Misery*, I remind myself. *Not Missouri. Misery and all the things we’re leaving behind. Fort Despair. Uncle Deet. Our endlessly hopeless, broken, unmagical lives.*

And Gramma.

*Yes, and Gramma.*

I used to think she was the glue, that once she left us we’d start to fall apart. But it turned out to be nothing like that. We’d already been falling apart, even with her there. She just ended up being one more chunk of our lives that broke off and drifted away. I can’t even remember how she fit anymore.

Missouri had been bad. Worse than Georgia, that’s for sure, and even then we’d been glad to leave. And now we’re leaving Missouri behind too, running away. So, where does that leave us? I can’t imagine anywhere else possibly being worse—even Idaho, which is where we’re going—but then again, I wouldn’t bet on things getting any better, either.

I turn back to the road ahead, back to the endless corn.

CENTRAL MAGIC NEXT EXIT

Out the window, a change in scenery. Finally some golden grassy-looking stuff. Hay, maybe. Or oats. No idea what the difference is. As long as it’s not corn. I’ve had enough of cornstalks to last a lifetime.

WELCOME TO MAGIC

And right after it:

STOP BY AND STAY FOR A SPELL

And I don't know where it comes from, but my laughter bursts out of me. I cough, try and cover it up, but Mom turns around, gives me another one of those looks: *What's so funny?* I shrug an innocent *What?* She raises her eyebrows: *Stop laughing.* Finally I frown at her. *Who's laughing?* A whole conversation in facial expressions. How depressing is that?

She shakes her head and looks away before I can react. She always has to have the last word.

The sign at the bottom of the exit ramp tells us that the town is less than a mile away to the right. I look, but there's nothing to see in that direction, just that thin, stubbly, weedy stuff. Prairie grass, I decide.

To the left, the road shies away from us like a stray dog with its tail stuck between its legs, like it was caught doing something it wasn't supposed to do. *Bad road. Bad!* It dips beneath the highway, turns and disappears around the hump of the overpass.

"What's a world famous juggernaut?" Dad says.

I look up. "What's a *what?*"

He lifts a finger from the steering wheel and points to a small, handmade sign buried in a mound of rocks across the road.

MAGIC, HOME OF THE WORLD FAMOUS  
JUGGERNAUT

The paint is faded and spattered with mud and dust, but at least it's bullet hole-free. Apparently, sign hunting is only allowed on the interstate around here.

"Must be some kind of giant hoagie or something," Dad guesses. "You know, like the sixty-ounce steak we saw that guy try to eat the other night. The *Mammoth.*" He says it like

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ingesting a four-pound hunk of cow is a sign of manliness. Of course, he was at the salad bar when the guy puked it all back up into his wife's purse. We'd left right after that, as did a lot of other folks.

Mom sits and stares out the window without making a sound. It's like she's in a completely different universe.

Dad sighs and turns the steering wheel. Gravel crunches beneath our wheels as the van lets out another oily, black fart. Just another carbon footprint that'll end up plastered over our back window for the rest of the trip. Before long, even the messages people leave for us there will be gone.

## 2

### *[Another life]*

#### *Precocious.*

That was the word my dad used to describe me when I was a baby. Said I was advanced for my age and that's how come you could tell I was his daughter. Like there'd ever been any question about that, not when we have the exact same thin nose and wiry brown hair and weak chin. He'd been one of those *wunderkind* types growing up—truly shocking, I know—but that's why he was such an authority on the matter of me being the next Hillary Clinton or Sally Ride. Or Billy Jean King, whoever she was. I might be from Georgia, but I never really favored country music all that much.

“The sky's the limit for Maddy,” you can hear him say on those old tapes. Figures he'd use that analogy, given that he had trained to be a fighter pilot.

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He boasted that on the day I turned eight months old I stood right up and took my first step. Like I'd finally made up my mind about things needing to get done and the only way to do them was on the soles of my own two feet, not on hands and knees like all the other under-ones in my playgroup. He bragged that I was running like crazy around the house within a month of that, slamming into walls and caroming off the furniture. To hear him tell it, Mom had a hell of a time keeping up with me. I'd climb the stairs just to fall back down them, open cabinets I had no business getting into.

Maybe I hit a wall once too hard, or fell and did something inside me. I don't know. It's as good an explanation for me turning out like this as any I've ever heard.

Dad's not like that anymore, of course. Now it's like he's in this perpetual state of shell shock. If he'd ever been in combat, the doctors at the base hospital would say he has PTSD—post-traumatic stress disorder—but he's never been in combat. Not unless you count being married to Mom, which it sure seems like lately.

Okay, that was mean.

He'd deny it all if he could, the bragging. But I kept the old videotapes. My first Christmas, him saying I was quite the gymnast. As if trying to roll myself over at three months was some kind of predictor of future potential. Him claiming I'd be walking by Easter. Well, he almost got that one right.

He'd forgotten all about those tapes, thought he'd thrown them away after we left Hansen Air Force Base in Georgia. Even offered to dispose of them once and for all after I'd unearthed in the attic of the house in Missouri. Gramma told him that she'd come back and haunt him if he ever touched those tapes. I

remember it quite clearly because they almost never spoke to each other.

Despite her quirks, I liked Gramma. She had her good points. Anyway, she and I would have these private conversations late at night, after everyone else had gone to bed. And whenever I'd bring up her being "deaf," which is what she always claimed, she'd neither deny nor confirm it. She'd just shrug and say that she could read my mind as well as my lips and that's how come we could talk so easily like that. Maybe she really could read minds, I don't know. When I was real little, it was just easier to accept that than to try and understand the deeper issues at play.

My best memory of her is at the *Sizzler* salad bar in Girard, picking the cherry tomatoes out of the bowl and popping them straight into her mouth, chewing them right there while everyone waited for her to move on to the cucumbers or the garbanzo beans. The other customers would get so angry. "Use the tongs, ma'am! That's what they're there for." And Mom, her face as red as those tomatoes, would hiss across the table at Dad until he finally got up and went over and pulled Gramma back.

She wasn't senile. She just didn't care.

All the way back to the table, she'd be smacking her lips and licking her fingers, much to the distress of my parents and the other diners around us. Much to my own amusement. I was ten—eleven, maybe—so it was more entertaining than embarrassing for me. It's not like everyone wasn't already staring at us. She had this uncanny ability to slip back to the salad bar when my parents weren't looking.

It was when she started chowing on the black olives that you knew it was time to leave. She loved black olives, but I swear her stomach worked some strange chemistry with them. We'd

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have to drive home with the windows wide open and the fan blowing full blast just to keep from gassing ourselves out. It didn't matter what the weather was like outside—rain, sleet, snow. The Ozarks in the dead of winter can get pretty freaking cold. She didn't care, like I said. Maybe she lacked a sense of smell and a sense of cold to go along with her lack of hearing.

“If you throw so much as one of them home movie video tape cassettes in the trash,” she'd told Dad, “I will haunt you forever after.”

“Oh, so, now I'm not even allowed to throw away my own crap?” He was waving the tape in question in front of her face, but also keeping it just out of her reach.

“They are not your tapes, Lenny, not anymore. They belong to my granddaughter. They are her legacy, the story of her life.”

All I could do was stare at the two them and wonder what the hell I'd started by bringing them down from the attic.

Gamma finished by saying, “And don't you speak to your mother that way, boy.”

“Well...” He threw the tape into the box where it landed with a clatter with all the others. “I wouldn't want you to haunt me, Ma.” And he stormed out of the room.

Thing is, you don't have to watch very much of those old movies before you can see it in his eyes. My dad was already a haunted man.

# 3

We skirt a small hill and there it is, rising up from the center of a shallow, broad depression that might have been a lake once, eons ago. The Lost City of Magic. Or maybe it's sinking back into the dirt. I can't really tell.

Beyond the scattered buildings and occasional grain silos, the land opens up. Gently rolling, huge expanses of empty, sandblasted prairie. Nothing much interrupts it except for an occasional twisted oak or a flattened boulder that looks more like a giant gray cowpat than granite. A thin line of electrical towers marches off toward a low rolling ridge way in the distance. The wires disappear and reappear between folds in the air. Everything is dry and barren. Haze carpets the horizon, just slightly browner and more transparent than all the rest.

The road we're on runs straight through the center of town. A half dozen or so side streets radiate outward at obscene angles, like the dried, withered-up tentacles of a dead octopus, each road

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suddenly ending at a vacant lot or else dissolving away into the earth. Decaying foundations jut from the weeds. The houses still standing are dingy gray. The walls are gray; the roofs are gray. And everything looks like it's slowly drifting away from everything else.

"Maybe we should get back on the highway," I say. "See if we can find a *real* town."

Mom's hand rises, even as her face stays glued to the window. It flutters for a moment in the direction of the windshield, then falls back into her lap. Dad seems to understand what this means, though I do not. Or perhaps it means nothing at all, just a random muscle spasm. In any case, he keeps on driving and Mom keeps on staring at nothing.

"This *is* a real town, Maddy," Dad says, almost too cheerfully. He points out the windshield. "There's a Mickey-D's."

I see it, the familiar red and yellow sign, but I don't believe it. It looks so out of place here, plopped right down in the middle of all this...nothingness.

Beyond the Golden Arches lies a trio of squat, drab-looking buildings. Someone's idea of a hotel. They remind me of the enlisted barracks at Fort Despair.

Dad puts on his blinker and the van starts to slow, but then Mom raises her hand again. The blinker goes off and we keep going straight.

We pass a 7-Eleven, a chapel, a funeral home. There's a service station, but it looks like it's out of business. The sign above it is faded. It asks that all-important question: GOT GAS?

Mom mumbles something, points at the sign. First thing to come out of her mouth since we turned off the highway. Dad

looks down through the steering wheel, then back up. “No, we still got three-quarters of a tank.”

She swivels her head at him and sighs.

“What? We filled up in Lincoln, remember? Oh, I get it.” He laughs at himself and keeps going. “Funny.”

The station windows are all boarded-up, and the nail heads bleed black. Despite its abandoned look, the front door is open and a dog is sprawled out over the threshold, panting away in a small circle of shade from the man sitting next to him. The man’s coveralls are dark green, smeared with old grease and oil. He doesn’t look up as we drift past, but his fingers move on the dog’s neck, which I take as a sign of life.

Out by the road, an ancient-looking gas pump stands guard, rust-red and rounded on top, a knuckle of numbers announcing gas prices my parents probably haven’t seen since they were my age.

“Okay, here we are,” Dad says as we pull into the lot of an actual donut shop. The flatbed next to us is filled with hay bales and rusted machinery and doesn’t look like it’s moved in months. “Let’s make it snappy. Okay?”

I don’t need a reminder. Even before he’s cut the engine, I’ve reached down and unlocked my chair from the floor.

# 4

## *[Things worth celebrating]*

Unlike Dad, Mom was never a bragger. It didn't mean she didn't care. She cared a lot. Too much, even. That's always been my problem with her.

Instead, she had one of those perpetual calendar thingies with all the months and days in it. Even a space for February 29<sup>th</sup>, for things that happen on a leap day. Not that anything ever does. It's like people unconsciously know it'll screw everything up, figuring out how to celebrate a Leap Day event on non-leap years. Maybe it should be a law that only bad things happen on February 29th. Really bad things, I mean. Then you'd only have to remember them once every four years.

Anyway, that's what these perpetual calendar things are for: remembering. So no matter what year something happened in, like a birthday or anniversary, you would always know that it

happened on a certain day—say, July third or December eighth, or something like that.

I'd dug it out of a box in the attic a few weeks after finding the tapes and had tucked it away in my dresser without knowing what it was at first. I liked the way the tiny thing looked, with its gold-edged pages and Mom's careful lettering. After Dad's argument with Grandma, I kept it a secret from them. I didn't want anyone to take it away from me.

I keep it with me wherever I go, in my back pocket. It reminds me of all the important things that happened, all the wonderful, amazing firsts that Mom thought were worthy of remembering. Take May, for example. Two entries. The one on the eighteenth says:

#### STITCHES (1y8m7d)

It didn't take me long to figure out how to decode Mom's one- and two-word clues. Once I got the first few, it wasn't really that difficult at all. On May eighteenth, when I was one year, eight months, and seven days old, I got my first stitches.

The other May entry, on the twenty-second, is the more significant one of the two:

#### STEP (8m11d)

You can probably figure that one out on your own. Like I said, the code's not especially hard.

And in case you didn't pick up on it, according to Mom, I didn't actually take my first step until eleven days *after* I turned eight months old. Okay, minor discrepancy between her and

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Dad's versions of events, I know. Not the end of the world. But there you have it: they didn't even agree on something like that way back then. Which I suppose goes a long way to explaining how things are now.

The stitches were on my stomach, by the way. No biggie. I don't even remember getting them. I still have the scar, though. Uncle Deet once told me it was way better to have it there on my belly where everyone can see it. "You need to show off your war wounds," he'd said.

Of course, anyone else would just be like, "Girl, that tiny little thing?" And they'd be right. It's virtually microscopic compared to the ginormous scar Uncle Deet got on his right shoulder when his A-10 Thunderbolt got blown into a million pieces eight angels over southern Iraq.

That's jet pilot-speak, by the way. An angel is a thousand feet. So, one moment Uncle Deet's screaming along at almost four hundred miles an hour, eight thousand feet up in the air. The next, he's hurtling to the ground in a big metal coffin. That's how Dad tells it: A big, *burning*, metal coffin. But there's no arguing that Uncle Deet's wounds were worth showing off.

"Just tell anyone who asks that it's a shrapnel wound," he always used to joke, poking his fingertip at the white crescent where my scar puckers out.

Shrapnel? Right. All I'd done was crawl over a piece of dead crab shell on the beach.

Anyway, after things started going wrong, Mom stopped keeping up the calendar. It was up to me to fill in all the other important things she neglected, both back then and since. Not the *first* things she and Dad used to commemorate, but all the *last* things they've tried to forget. The things I stopped doing. The

things that marked the beginning of the second part of my short, miserable life.

Like for example, in December, on my third Christmas Eve:

LAST RAN (2y3m13d)

That was the day I crashed into the Christmas tree like a drunk sailor, pulling it down on myself because my legs had apparently decided they weren't needed anymore. It's on tape, so I have definitive proof of when things started going wrong. Not that anyone'll ever see it on *America's Funniest Home Videos*.

Then—I don't have the exact day, but I do know it was around four months later:

LAST STOOD (2y7m)

# 5

Mom turns in her seat in the front of the van and throws me an irritated look for breaking protocol.

“You know that’s not safe, unlocking your wheelchair before Dad cuts the engine.”

But I ignore her. I swing myself over to the door, fiddle with the joystick, nudging it back and forth impatiently, waiting for her to pull out the ramp, even though I don’t need it. I have a wonderful stair-climbing chair. It’s a one-of-its-kind.

“In and out,” Dad says. His voice is suddenly tight and his temples do that throbbing thing that means he’s annoyed. I can’t imagine what for. Maybe the way Mom’s acting. He holds the shop door open with his foot and fingers his watch distractedly. A blast of cold air hits us, and the faded sign above his head sways slightly, whispering complaints on hinges that have long ago stopped asking for grease. “Let’s be quick.”

Once we're inside, I head off to the bathroom. "Sprinkles," I say. Then I add, so as to avoid any confusion, "On my donut." Then, for further clarification: "The colored candy kind."

"Sprinkles, *please*," Mom calls after me.

"Yeah, thanks."

When I get back, Mom and Dad are arguing. They don't even bother to stop when they see me, but they do pause long enough to order. After Dad pays, they start right back up again.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Mom says.

"Am I?"

She narrows her eyes at him. He shrugs back, snatches the tray and his change and escapes to an empty table to map out his defenses. Before he sits down, he pushes a chair to another table so I can pull up and join in on the festivities.

"Len, talk to me? What's going on? Why the sudden hurry?"

"Just antsy to get to Nicholson is all."

"We spent a whole day in St. Louis, plus half of another. You acted like the last thing you wanted to do was get to your new assignment on time, and now suddenly you're in a rush to get there?"

"If it bothered you so much—"

"It didn't bother me then. It bothers me now how you're acting."

"Four days on the road, Helen. Four days and we've gone less than seven hundred miles."

"You don't want to push the van too hard."

"There's a lot of smoke coming out of the back," I say around a mouthful of donut. It's not Krispy Kreme, but least it's not sawdust, either.

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“A little smoke’s normal for Volkswagens, Mad.” He sighs. “I’ll buy a couple quarts before we leave here. Okay?”

“This has to do with Dietrich, doesn’t it?” Mom asks. She won’t let it drop.

“What Dietrich? What are you talking about? I was just thinking it was Maddy’s birthday coming up in a week.”

*Birthday?* I can’t believe I’d almost forgotten.

Mom throws her hands up in the air. “So it is about him.”

“Who said it was? You brought him up, not me!” Dad looks over at me, but if he thinks I’m going to rescue him, he’s wrong. Last thing I want to do is get in the middle of a Mom-Dad-Uncle Deet argument. I decide it’s safer to pretend my donut is suddenly the most interesting thing I’ve ever seen in my entire life. I start picking out the sprinkles and sorting them into separate piles on my napkin.

“Show a little respect for the guy,” Dad mumbles. “Besides, it’s just one night.”

“It’s Madison’s sixteenth birthday! You promised, Len. Look—I said look at me, Len!”

“I don’t want to fight,” Dad says. “Didn’t you say that just this morning? ‘We’re not going to fight?’”

“Oh, Jesus Christ on a cracker, Len! Don’t you throw my own words back at me. How are we *not* supposed to fight when you insist...” She sputters trying to find the right words. “Len, you won’t even talk to me anymore.”

“Why should I? Whenever I do, all you do is find something to yell about!”

“I’m not yelling, Len!”

“You’re yelling now.”

“This is how I talk!”

“Mom, Dad!” I whisper urgently. “People are staring.”

I happen to be very sensitive to staring, since I’m the recipient of an awful lot of it. It’s not like people have never seen a person in a wheelchair before, so why do they always look at me like I’m an alien or something?

“What the hell do you want me to say?” Dad demands.

Mom leans back in her chair and crosses her arms. “I really wish you wouldn’t swear.”

“And I really wish you wouldn’t yell. Besides,” he says, “since when is hell any worse than *Jesus Christ on a cracker*?”

“I don’t say it like that!”

“Yes, you do, Mom.”

“You stay out of this, Madison Elizabeth!”

I go back to my sprinkles, but I can feel my face growing hot and my eyes starting to sting. I won’t cry. I refuse to let them see it.

“Len, it’s just that you get stupid. You make bad decisions,” she whispers, “and then the next thing you’re.... Look, we made a deal.”

He shakes his head. “It’s been long enough. I can handle it.”

“It’s never going to be long enough, Len.” She stops and takes a deep breath. “We just can’t go through that again. We need you with us.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” He lifts his head and his eyes flash. “I. Am. Here. That should count for something.”

“It counts for everything, Len.”

“Then what more do you want from me, Helen?”

Mom sighs. “This is Madison’s birthday. You have an obligation—”

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Dad slams his fist onto the table. The coffee cups jump and my sprinkle piles collapse. He drops his muffin onto his napkin and pushes away from us. As he stands, he bends down over Mom until their faces are just inches apart. “Don’t speak to me about obligation.”

“Len, I’m trying, but—”

But Dad doesn’t wait for her to finish. He turns and walks out of the place. He doesn’t even hurry, but he’s gone before either of us can even move. It’s not the first time he’s done that.

I look over at Mom, expecting her to totally lose it, but she surprises me. She calmly picks up their coffee cups and Dad’s muffin and stands up to leave. She shakes her head at the table. The look on her face isn’t sad or angry, just resigned.

“I’ll be in the van,” she tells me, and she suddenly sounds spent, like the last bit of air coming out of a balloon. “Finish up here soon so we can get back on the road.” She turns. Two strides and she’s over by the door, resting her arm on the bar. She looks out across the parking lot but doesn’t move right away.

Then, slowly, deliberately, she leans into the door and pushes on it as if it were the heaviest thing in the world. She slips through the opening, still limping, still favoring the ankle I’d bitten last night.

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