

Prologue

Ten years ago

“Maggie, did you cash out that corner booth?” asked Big Ralph from behind the counter, his meaty hands splayed on the worn Formica. The fluorescent lights shining down from above emphasized the crater-like texture of his skin.

“Yuh huh,” she nodded, pulling the receipt with the little wad of ones and fives out of the front pocket of her uniform.

Ralph smiled and then tipped his two chins toward the diner’s front door. “Then why don’t you go on and get out of here? Isn’t Dylan leaving tomorrow?”

She wiped her slightly greasy hands on her seafoam green dress and smiled, trying to hide the ache blooming in her chest. “Yep. Off to Vanderbilt. Full ride scholarship and everything.” Her voice came out overly bright as she compensated for the lack of enthusiasm she felt. Which was selfish, she knew. Dylan had worked his ass off on the baseball diamond to get that scholarship, and it would open incredible doors to him, maybe even a Major League contract. So what if she was feeling sorry for herself that he was leaving her behind in Ivy Hills, their sleepy little suburb of Dallas? Sure, she’d miss him, but they’d do the long-distance thing and figure it out.

“That kid’s gonna be a star. You hang on to that one, Miss Jennings,” said Ralph, and Maggie nodded, her ponytail swinging.

“Oh, I plan to. I’ll see you tomorrow for the breakfast rush,” she said, grabbing her purse from behind the counter. She fished her keys out and headed for the beat-up Toyota she shared

with her mama, stepping out into the hot August evening. Swampy, humid air surrounded her, coating her skin with a film. The cheap polyester of her uniform clung to her uncomfortably, and she tugged it down as she walked through the parking lot, her sneakers squeaking quietly on the pavement. A full moon hung in the sky, so white it was almost neon, competing with the buzzing blue sign at the entrance to the diner's parking lot. As she walked, her dress scooted up a bit more, and she tugged it down again. She couldn't wait to see it on the floor of Dylan's truck as they steamed up the windows.

Sadness pulled at her. This would be their last time together for a while. Weeks, maybe longer, depending on how hard it was to visit with his baseball schedule and her working at the diner and cleaning houses with Mama. Hopefully within a year, she'd have enough money saved up to start taking classes at the local community college. Her grades were good, so she hoped maybe a scholarship would be in the cards. With a shake of her head, she pushed the sadness away. She didn't want to spend their last night together wallowing, missing him before he was even gone. She'd have plenty of time to miss him in the future. A future that started tomorrow. One she wasn't sure she was quite ready for.

She drove through town, Rascal Flatts blasting on the stereo through the one good speaker, the windows cranked down to compensate for the busted A/C. It was a quiet Sunday night, and there was hardly any traffic as she wound her way from Ralph's Diner to Willow Park on the edge of town. Their park, where they talked, and kissed, and skinny dipped in the creek. Where she'd given him her virginity under a blanket of stars. They'd spent this past summer claiming that park. It held laughter and sighs and moans. It held whispered conversations about hopes and dreams and fears. It was theirs.

Just like she was his, and he was hers. They'd only been together for four months, but she knew he was her forever. Knew it like she knew her name. She sang along to the radio, fingering the delicate gold M pendant that hung around her neck. Dylan had given it to her for her eighteenth birthday a month ago, and she never took it off. It was the nicest, most expensive thing anyone had ever given her, and she'd be heartbroken if something happened to it.

She pulled into the secluded corner of the park, her tires crunching along the gravel pathway. Dylan's truck was parked up ahead, facing the creek lined with willow trees. Thunder rumbled in the distance, a cool breeze picking up and rustling the leaves of the trees. She came to a stop beside Dylan's truck and rolled up her windows against the threatening rain. Stepping out, she frowned at the obvious difference in their vehicles. The shiny newness of Dylan's truck, a high school graduation gift from his father. Her car was dotted with spots of rust, the driver's side-view mirror held on with duct tape. Those cars and what they represented were part of the reason they spent so much time in the park. His father didn't approve of her—she wasn't sure if it was her lack of money or her lack of a father that was the bigger issue for him—and her mama would kill her if she brought a boy into the house. She'd gotten pregnant with Maggie at eighteen, and would be damned if she'd let the same thing happen to her daughter. Granted, Mama didn't know she was on birth control.

What Mama didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

She opened the door and slipped into the cool air conditioning of Dylan's truck. It still had that new vehicle smell, mixed with the scent of his cologne. He sat in the driver's seat, and her heart gave a little lurch just at the sight of him. She'd started up with him because he was gorgeous—thick, short brown hair, big blue eyes, killer smile, athletic build—but she'd fallen for him because he was funny, and sweet, and made her feel like a princess. She loved him. So

much. And more than that, she loved who she was with him. He made her feel like somebody when she was with him. She felt bigger than Maggie Jennings, who worked in the diner and scraped and fought for everything she had.

“Hey, baby,” she crooned, moving to put her arms around him.

He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, but then gently pushed her away. “Mags, we gotta talk. Just listen, okay?”

She frowned. “What’s wrong?”

He sighed and stared out the windshield, not looking at her. Something cold and heavy settled in the pit of her stomach, and she recognized it instantly as dread. He wouldn’t look at her and he’d rejected her kiss. He tapped his strong fingers on the steering wheel, drawing out the silence. Something was wrong.

“What?” she asked again.

“I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“Uh, yeah. I know. Not exactly a newsflash,” she said, hoping her little joke would lighten the mood in the truck. It didn’t.

He pushed a hand through his hair and shook his head. “I don’t know how to say any of this.”

She sat back in her seat, wrapping her arms around herself and forced herself to ask the question pinging through her brain; the one she was afraid she already knew the answer to. “Are you breaking up with me?”

He exhaled sharply. “I…” He turned to look at her, finally, his eyes full of regret.

“Oh my God, you are,” she whispered. He didn’t say anything. “Why?” He still didn’t say anything, and she felt a desperate kind of anger rising up inside her. “If you’re gonna break my heart, Dylan McCormick, then go ahead and break it already.”

“Shit, Mags, I’m sorry. I just...I just don’t think the long-distance thing is gonna work.”

She looked at him with narrowed eyes. “Is this about long distance—which, by the way, you were fine with a few days ago—or about your dad hating my guts?”

“He doesn’t hate your guts, Mags.” She shot him a challenging glare, and he sighed.

“Okay, yeah, he’s not your biggest fan, but that’s not the reason for this.” He didn’t meet her eyes as he spoke, his hands moving restlessly on the steering wheel. He was lying. Maggie knew it. She recognized it because it was the first time he’d ever lied to her.

“It’s not? Don’t lie to me, Dylan.” She forced herself to take a breath, trying to slow her racing heart, racking her brain for a way to salvage this. She laid a hand on his thigh. “If you love me, at least tell me the truth.”

His body stiffened, his jaw tense, the muscle there jumping. “I’m not lying to you.”

She took her hand away, her eyes starting to sting. “I thought you loved me,” she whispered, her voice hoarse.

“I do,” he said quietly. “Which is why I’m letting you go. You gotta live your life. This is what’s best for us.”

“If it’s what’s best for *us*, it would’ve been nice to get a vote before you decided *for* me.”

“You don’t understand,” he said, his eyes bright.

Her anger won out again and she pulled her hand away. “You’re right! I don’t. So why don’t you explain it to me?”

He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “You can have a good life without me. A better life. If you stay with me, it’ll only hold you back.”

“I have a good life with you. Or I thought I did.”

A silence hung in the truck, heavy and thick, just like the air outside. Maggie started to cry. Her chest hurt, and she knew it was because her heart was caving in on itself. She was losing the first and only man she’d ever loved. He was leaving her. Humiliation washed over her. How could she have been so stupid? How could she have given him her heart, her body, her time, her devotion when she clearly meant so little to him? She should’ve known better than to think she was good enough for him. Mama had been right to warn her.

“Mags, I’m so sorry,” he said, reaching for her hand. She snatched it away before he could touch her.

“I thought I was gonna marry you.” It was a confession and an accusation, wrapped up into one sentence.

“Mags—” An anguished look tightened his features, and she hated herself for feeling sorry for him. He didn’t deserve her pity. He didn’t deserve anything she had to give if he could just throw her away.

She shook her head. “Don’t. I don’t want to hear any more of your bullshit. I don’t want you to pretend that this isn’t about your family thinking I’m not good enough for you. And I don’t want this anymore,” she said, reaching up and undoing her necklace. She dropped it into the cup holder so she wouldn’t have to touch him. Her chest ached as she opened the truck’s door, slamming it behind her.

Thunder cracked through the sky and a gentle rain started to fall, pattering against the ground. She was fumbling with her keys when she heard the truck’s door open. “Magnolia,

wait,” called Dylan. His voice sliced right through her, and she curled her hands into fists, digging her nails into her palms, letting that bite of pain anchor her. She spun to face him, blinking rain and tears out of her eyes.

“Fuck you, Dylan McCormick. I hope I never see you again.” And with that, she got into her car and sped out of the parking lot, gravel flying beneath her tires.

She sobbed the whole way home.