

Suspended

The school bell rang up and down the halls of Elkins School, a brick building on Deer Street. At its sound, the students in Melanie Stirling's sophomore year class cheered with glee and instantaneously fled the room. Melanie or as most kids called her "Mel" Stirling took her time packing her things, examining the big "A" on her report card.

Mrs. Collins's eyes flickered upon Melanie's ketchup stained t-shirt before she broke into a wide smile. "It's been a pleasure having you in my class this year, Melanie."

Melanie looked up in surprise. She admired how Mrs. Collins so naturally dropped the "g" off of the word "having". She was one of the few people who could miraculously turn the unfeeling, harsh Appalachian accent into something gentle and kind. "Thanks, Mrs. Collins. It's been...great." She tried very hard to sound appreciative.

Mrs. Collins beamed. "Would you mind if I headed out?" she asked. "I've got a date at The Bar." *The Bar*. The only bar in town was called Kipsy's, but locals preferred their little euphemisms; *The Bar*.

"Oh," Melanie said. "Yeah! Have a good summer."

"You too, dear." Mrs. Collins said. She gave her one final wink before taking leave of the classroom.

Melanie slowly packed up her things and soon followed Mrs. Collins out the door. She took her time walking through the now eerily silent halls in no rush to get home. She'd love to be at the nice, cool Elkins library on a blistering June day like this one. Sadly, that wasn't going to happen what with the long list of chores she had to do. Chores. The bane of her existence. The Stirlings always had chores. There were fourteen children in all, so there was always work to be done.

Melanie was just pondering what she might spend her evening doing if she ever finished her never-ceasing to-do list when she came face-to-face with four of her female classmates, Claire, Brooke, Krysta, and Emily. Melanie hesitated for a moment, debating whether or not she wanted to get into a confrontation on the last day of school. In her world, it paid to be one of the smart ones. Smart girls avoided fights even if they could win. She resolved to pass by them.

“Where do you think you’re goin’?” Claire asked, blocking her way. Claire was a big girl for fifteen with an angry mane of brown frizz that came unflatteringly down around her ears.

“Let me by,” Melanie said. She looked right into Claire’s glassy eyes, jowl quivering and blood rushing to her ears.

“Hmmm,” Claire pondered as the other girls smirked. “No, I don’t think so. It’s *summer*. See any teachers around?” She laughed softly. “We do what we want.” She reached out a hand to stroke Melanie’s straight blonde hair, and Melanie spritely yanked Claire’s hand as hard as she possibly could. She ran out of the hallway as fast as her short, scrawny legs could carry her. She could hear Claire’s angry laughing to mask her pain all the way down the hall.

Melanie kept on running until she ran straight first into Bobby Merrin standing with his arms crossed outside the main school doors.

“Mel!” he said enthusiastically.

Usually, Melanie couldn’t imagine someone she’d less rather talk to than Bobby Merrin, the school rube, but considered her options. A big jock with muscles might be exactly what she needed. “Hey, Bobby!” she said. “Excited for summer?”

“Heck yeah, I am,” he said in a lame attempt at swagger. “Got big plans, little lady.”

*Little. Lady. Ugh.* But she smiled, slightly panting. “Oh yeah? What might those be?”

He leaned in. “Well, most of them involve you.”

Melanie practically gagged but kept her mouth moving. “Oh, yeah?”

“How’d you like to come to the carnival with me tonight?”

“The carnival?” Melanie said. There was nothing she could think she’d less rather do than go to the Elkin Carnival with Bobby Merrin of all people. Just when she was about to use chores as an excuse when Claire and her accomplices opened the doors with malice in their eyes.

*Do what you gotta do, Melanie.*

“Sure,” Melanie said. She took her opportunity to put her hand in Bobby’s, much to his shock and awe. She could almost hear Claire cracking her knuckles from across the lot. She’d always been sweet on Bobby Merrin. Melanie motioned at Bobby’s truck. “Drive me home?”

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Persuading Mrs. Stirling (sometimes referred to as “mother”, usually not “mom”, and never “mama”), to let her go to the carnival was going to be tricky. Especially on the last day of school when all the kids would be home and in need of overseeing. The most irksome part was that she didn’t even want to go, but bailing on Bobby would be worse than spending one night out with him. The carnival was only a couple of hours. The alternative was a whole summer of Bobby’s nonstop nagging.

“No!” Mrs. Stirling said when Melanie first broached the subject. Mrs. Stirling was a stout, natural blonde with overly puckered lips and two-shades-too-dark foundation. Just one look and anyone could tell she’d been good-looking once. Now, her freckles were stretched by wrinkles and her striking green eyes had faded to a dull hazel. “I feed you, I pay bills. All I ask is for you to do your part. Is that so much?” She said this as her shaky fingers with chipped nail polish popped open a cold glass bottle of coke. She wiped her forehead with her wet hand.

“No,” Melanie said boldly. “Only that you also ask for me to be a full-time maid.”

Mrs. Stirling looked at Melanie in disbelief. “Look at this mess!” she shouted. Melanie didn’t even flinch. She’d long gotten used to Mrs. Stirling’s laughably short temper and memorized-by-heart speeches. “Fine maid you are!” she laughed. “I have enough to be doing, all I ask is for a little help. You can’t even do that. It’s not my fault Daddy isn’t here for us.”

Melanie fumed at the floor. *Daddy*. Mrs. Stirling’s safe-word. The victim card. She could feel Mrs. Stirling’s triumphant smirk looming over her neck.

Melanie didn’t take the bait. Instead, she bit her lip and resorted to her most hated strategy; telling the truth.

“I was asked to the carnival by a boy,” she said.

Mrs. Stirling’s entire face changed. Melanie generally associated these looks of sick excitement with glasses of red wine and packs of Marlboros. But of course, boys were another drug of choice. “A boy?” Mrs. Stirling asked in a controlled calm voice. “Who?”

Melanie gritted her teeth. “Bobby Merrin,” she muttered.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that,” Mrs. Stirling said, even though Melanie knew she’d heard perfectly well the first time.

“Bobby. Merrin.” Melanie repeated.

“Merrin!” Mrs. Stirling squealed. “You got asked by one of the *Merrin* boys!” Suddenly, she turned business-like. “Well! I remember when one of the Merrin boys asked *me* out to a dance. Of course, I had to go and pick your father but...” she rambled on for a while and Melanie stopped paying attention. “...turn out the way they do for a reason, don’t they? Of course, you can go. No more chores. You need your beauty rest.”

Melanie didn’t need to be told twice. At these golden words, she raced out of the room and only heard “Wear some of my lipstick!” before she slammed the front porch door shut.

The West Virginia air was sticky on her skin at 4:30 pm. The Sun was still well up, and her farmer's tan was the only thing between her and a nasty case of heatstroke. As Melanie walked toward the barn, she set her jaw. Poor nutrition had left her face looking, in Melanie's opinion, bony and drawn. Some would call her face model-like, the sharp angles clear examples of exquisite bone structure. Melanie called it looking gaunt and hungry. Some would call her enormous eyes infinite vessels of expression. Melanie called them "Lil' pug balls".

As she headed to her bedroom, she said an affectionate hello to the horses and scaled up the ladder to her little loft she called home. Fourteen children were too many for the three-story Stirling main house, so Melanie elected to live in one of the barns with the horses. There'd been little protest. She was one of the oldest, and "Melanie always *did* like the animals." It wasn't so bad except that she often smelled of horse dung. There were worse things.

She spent the next few hours flipping through her worn-out crime paperbacks and munching on breakfast bars she'd swiped before talking to Mrs. Stirling. Melanie had always been painfully aware she was underdeveloped physically, so tried to overdevelop her brain. So far, she wasn't sure how successful she'd been. It would help if she had someone she could actually talk to about the things she read, but kids from Elkton generally didn't talk about books. As she turned the pages, her stomach growled as though to remind her that the end of the school year meant she'd no longer be eating much. Every summer, she lost a stone from the sudden lack of school pasta and chocolate milk. She'd soon spend the whole next year trying to gain it back.

Soon enough, the yellow Sun began fading into a pale pink which signaled it was time to get ready for the carnival. She pulled out a red-and-white plaid frock that showed off her shoulders. It came in just above the waist which Melanie thought made her look like a child singing in a church choir. Impatiently, she brushed her unusually long, wavy hair until it sat

(somewhat) neatly on top of her head and flowed down just past her elbows. If she'd had a mirror, she'd likely have snorted at how diminutive she looked. Pixie features in a white dress that illuminated in the night. Like a candlestick floating on water.

Bobby pulled up at her house five minutes before 8 pm. Mrs. Stirling peeked out from behind one of the kitchen window curtains as they pulled out of the gravel private drive and zoomed off for the carnival. Melanie was soon eager to get out of the car since she could tell Bobby was intoxicated (she prayed not enough to swerve into a tree) and unaware of how many times he'd tried to unsuccessfully wrap his right arm around her shoulders. She breathed a sigh of relief when she spotted the carnival, the usually empty surrounding fields now littered with tents of varying shapes and sizes. She spotted the ticket booth clearly behind the wrought-iron fence and made a beeline for it the moment they parked. She nervously crossed her arms and rubbed them as she realized how cold it was already getting.

Upon entering the carnival, it took Melanie's planet-sized eyes a few seconds to adjust, entering a world of flashing lights, firecrackers, and scrumptious culinary creations flavored with cinnamon and chocolate. Animated shouts of "Bobby, come over here!" rang out the moment they stepped foot inside the fairgrounds. Melanie wearily followed Bobby over to his fan clubs. After about an hour of being dragged every which way to meet his seemingly infinite number of friends, Melanie asked if she might go off on her own for a while.

"Oh, sure, Mel!" he said distractedly, at this point so drunk he was barely able to see straight. She had no idea how he was getting any entertainment watching his friends throw ping pong balls into goldfish bowls when he could barely hold himself up without stumbling. "Here's some money. Meet you by the funnel cakes in an hour."

*At least he was a generous drunk.*

She decided to splurge and spend several happy minutes munching on corndogs and cotton candy courtesy of Bobby's allowance. For the first time since she'd arrived, she felt warm. The food had done her good. She indulged in momentary illusions of grandeur, skipping down paths filled with vendors, accepting admiring looks with the cock of her head in a nod of acknowledgment.

It didn't take long for Melanie to lose interest in aimlessly wandering around the grounds. She soon found herself entranced by the carnival's biggest attraction; the Ferris wheel. She could hear the faint, gleeful screams as the bizarre contraption shot passengers into the star-speckled sky. Before she knew it, she was floating towards it, feet pulled towards the flickering bulbs like moths are to a flame. Her usually reproachful eyes glinted with feverish excitement.

Waiting in line, Melanie began having second thoughts. Her heart thumped with nerves. Much of her newfound strength seemed to be leaching out into the night air. Still, she pushed any anxious thoughts away, determined to enjoy herself. When the moment came for her to hop in the cart, she took a shaky breath and clambered in. Her hands impulsively gripped at the sides, clamping the cold metal as the rusty gates swung shut with a clatter. She became aware of how exposed she felt in her flimsy, farm dress. It was only when she heard a slight laugh to her right that she whipped her head over to see another passenger in the cart.

It was a boy. Or was it? The answer wasn't immediately transparent. He seemed to be her age in looks, but much older in demeanor. He was leaning back in seeming relaxation, as though he could be reading at a kitchen table. Her first thought was that she was jealous of his jacket. It was big and brown, made of real leather. Toasty warm. Her second thought was that he wasn't a local. One short sweep of his bookish glasses and messy mop of brown curls told her that much.

She briefly caught his eye and quickly looked in the other direction. She could feel his gaze on her. Long and unbreaking. He seemed to be inspecting her face as though he were a surgeon and she was some rare, undiscovered species. More than ever, she craved the snugness of a shawl. Thankfully, the Ferris wheel started up. They could both look elsewhere.

Only a few moments later, however, the boy (if he was a boy) began chuckling again.

“What?” Melanie asked defensively. Immediately, she almost recoiled from how aggressive the question came out. Her harsh, unseemly Appalachian drawl. “*Whaaa?*”

“Nothing,” he said, putting his hand on the corner of his mouth and chin. He had a low voice that curled at the edges like chocolate bar wrappers. “It’s just that I’ve never seen someone shake so much they’re actually vibrating the cart. If you try a bit harder, you might actually break us off from the wheel.”

She raised her eyebrows unimpressed. “Thanks.” Her jaw quivered a bit at the end. She suddenly realized she wasn’t feeling well. She was so nervous her teeth were actually chattering.

He slid his hand up so that his fingers were entangled in his curls. His eyebrows folded in genuine concern. “I’m sorry, I was only kidding,” he said.

She looked at him skeptically.

“I could hold your hand if that’d make you feel better,” he offered.

Melanie laughed. “It definitely won’t help, but thanks for the offer.”

The two of them sat in silence for several seconds as the wheel began to whirl upwards. Anxiety pricked her chest like one, big needle. The frosty air nipped at her nose and rose goosebumps all across her arms and legs. She was becoming very convinced that she had a bad case of what Mrs. Collins described as “vertigo”. Like the Hitchcock movie.



Fear must've shown on her face because the boy (if he was a boy) suddenly held out a hand in her direction and smiled. "Townes."

"What?" she asked distractedly. There it was again. That callous, "*Whaaa?*"

"My name. It's Townes Wallace."

"Oh," she said. She awkwardly shook his outstretched hand and then immediately looked away and stuck out her chin. She failed to look proud with her stubbornly quivering lower lip. His warm and steady hand had only emphasized how frigid and unsteady her own was. She'd been so warm a few minutes ago. Now, what with increasing nausea, she regretted the corndogs.

"This is when you tell me your name." he prompted.

"Oh!" she said, forgetting herself. "Melanie. Stirling."

"Melanie," he repeated. "But you go by Mel, right?"

She glanced at him in surprise. "Yeah. How'd you know?"

Townes shrugged. "Melanie doesn't suit you as much as Mel."

"Well," she said bluntly, "Townes doesn't seem like it suits *you* much but I don't have any other suggestions for what'd work better."

He peered at her in interest. "What about me doesn't seem like a Townes?"

The Ferris wheel stopped moving about halfway between the ground and the top of the wheel. Melanie suppressed a gasp and gripped the metal so tightly her knuckles turned white. Townes looked at her amusedly, but she shot him down with one irritated glance. "'Cause," she managed. "Townes Wallace makes me think of an accountant or something. You're..." she quickly scanned his face and saw only his imperturbable expression. "...not." she finished.

The wheel started up again and Townes grinned. "So, I'm not an accountant. I'll take it."

"Don't mention it," she said.

A small silence again. She took steadying breaths.

“So, what brings you to this fine spring carnival?” he asked.

She closed her eyes. She wished he’d stop talking so she could focus on not upchucking. Instead, she was having to open her mouth which was dangerous. “A friend,” she said shortly.

“Boyfriend?” he asked innocently.

“A boy who is a friend,” she said through a bursting breath.

“Hm,” he said. “Boy invites girl to carnival. He thinks it’s going wonderfully. Girl doesn’t think so.”

“What makes you say it’s not goin’ wonderful?” she said defensively, letting a bit of her drawl slip out.

“Because then you’d be down there with him and not up here flirting with me.”

The wheel began moving again and she looked at him in shock, for a moment forgetting both the motion sickness and the cold.

“I’m not *flirtin’* with you,” she said defiantly.

“Oh, I see. You’re just one of those girls who has witty banter with everyone.”

“Well,” she faltered. “Obviously, you don’t talk to many girls ‘cause this is how we talk.”

He grinned wickedly now. “No, I don’t think that’s it.”

She blinked. “Maybe you’re mistaking *flirtin’* with makin’ girls *sick*,” she said ruthlessly. “And if you can’t already tell, I’m just about to puke corndog all over you.”

He put up his hands in the air as though it couldn’t possibly matter and mimed locking his lips with an invisible key. Then, he looked at her with such an incredibly charming countenance that she was forced to mentally shake her head and concentrate on feeling sick as opposed to overthinking the rush of blood flooding into her cheeks.

Just then, she was saved by the distraction of the wheel stopping again. They'd reached the top, the height now spine-chilling. She was just about to close her eyes and black out the world when Townes raised his eyebrows and mimed for her to look over at the view from his side. This was a chivalrous offer, she supposed, considering the passenger on the right side had the superior view of the mountains while she saw only empty fields. She reluctantly scooted over so that she was within an inch of his left leg. She leaned so that his head was behind hers. She could hear his deep breathing, slow and steady. She became consciously aware that her own breath was speeding up and shallowing out. She determinedly examined the view, searching for any distractions; no such luck. There were no lights or signs of life beyond the carnival.

"Not much, huh?" Townes said

Melanie continued to focus ahead. "That can be a good thing. Not everyone *likes* cities."

He exhaled. She felt it, warm on her neck. She could see his eyelashes in her peripheral vision, long and full. Big enough to catch snowflakes. She slowly turned her body towards his, the space between them electrically charged. She would not be the one to look away first.

"I bet you like the city," he said softly.

Suddenly, a gut-wrenching sound stopped Melanie's heart. It sounded like the Ferris wheel had tried to start up again, but had gotten stuck. With a gasp, gravity threw her body weight further to the right, threatening to throw her over the edge. She clung to the rungs, her balance shifting. In the span of a second, Townes's warm hands clamped around her waist, fingers digging into her side. He squeezed, restoring her balance and pushing her to the left. The metal was ominously squealing and the cart was swinging back and forth. She overheard passengers below panicking, "What's goin' on?" The lights began flickering. *On, off. On, off. On, off.* Then, all went dark. She barely suppressed a scream and gaped at Townes in horror.

“What happened?” she choked out.

Townes shook his head uncertainly. “Maybe a part broke.”

This did little to reassure her. “So what?” she demanded, not even attempting to mask the drawl that escalated in times of stress. “Tell me, Sherlock Holmes: we stuck up here for hours?”

“Don’t panic,” he said quietly. “They’ll probably have it fixed in a few seconds.”

But those were empty words and they both knew it.

They waited in silence for what felt like several minutes until a sterile voice from a loudspeaker came booming over the carnival that the Ferris wheel was stuck and anyone with friends and family on the wheel would be sitting ducks until either the fire department got to the carnival or they figured out how to get the wheel back up and running.

“Oh, great.” Melanie spat, wishing she could rip her stupid, light-weight frock to shreds. At least then it could be reconfigured into a blanket that would cover her arms. “Mrs. Stirling is gonna kick my ass!”

Townes knitted his eyebrows in confusion. “Mrs. Stirling?”

“My mother,” Melanie said.

“You call your mom by her last name?” he asked curiously.

“Yeah, what do you call yours? Mommy?” Melanie seethed for a few moments and then felt it leak out like a faulty balloon. So, she was stuck. So what? Mrs. Stirling would know it had been no fault of her own. If anything, it’d be something to talk about at the grocery store. She could hear the loud conversations with the town busybodies now, purposely projected so that women in the aisle over could overhear:

*“My daughter was stuck on that Ferris wheel for hours last night...I’ll be havin’ a word with our county commissioner...Oh, yes, she went with Bobby Merrin.”*

No, it was this *boy* (was he a boy? was he?) making her unusually on edge. She was over her motion sickness and now felt the nerves pulsating from something else, this ball of electricity sending out shockwaves through her entire body. This *boy* who currently had his eyes closed beside her and seemed dead to the world. She needed to calm down.

“I guess this is when we tell each other our life stories, huh?” she started.

“Hmph,” was all he said, eyes still closed.

“Hmph,” she repeated. She waited for a couple of seconds. “You wanna start?”

He laughed in spite of himself and his eyes fluttered open. “Sure,” he scratched his head.

“I moved here from Illinois.”

She nodded. “When’d that happen?”

“Last year,” he said.

“How old are you?” she asked.

“A year above you. I’ll be a senior next year.”

So he *was* a boy. “Really? You should’ve said hi, maybe we could’ve hung out.”

“Ha,” he said sarcastically. “Talked to Mel Stirling. The most approachable girl at Elkins.”

“That supposed to mean something?” she asked, genuinely interested.

He raised his eyebrows. “It’s just that a lot of guys ask you out, and you always turn them down.”

“I just never met a guy I wanted to go on a date with,” Melanie said, startled. “If the right person asked me, I’d go.” Her eyes momentarily flickered up at Townes.

“I think plenty of good guys have liked you. You’ve just got a superiority complex.”

The way he said it. *Sue-peer-ee-or-it-y*. She wasn't even sure she could pronounce it right. He was purposely making her out to be an idiot.

"I don't," she said. Immediately it felt like a lie. "I just get asked by people I don't like."

"Yeah, perfectly fine guys who put themselves out there for you."

Melanie almost laughed in derision. "People like Bobby Merrin who think a fun date is smokin' a joint in the Walmart parkin' lot. I'm a *bit* classier than that."

"You don't even give them the chance to prove themselves," he contended.

"So, what about you then, city boy?" she asked, tensing her shoulders. "Why aren't you stuck on this Ferris wheel with your Elkins girlfriend? Maybe you're just the same as me. Think you're too good for us country bumpkins." Self-pity had bled into her voice.

"That'd be the opposite," he said, finally biting. "They think they're better than me and there's nothing I'll ever be able to do. They hate the way I talk, the way I look, the books I read."

"Well, that's their loss." she shrugged. "It's kids who are mean and angry that they'll never get out of the trailer park. They see you and they see everythin' they've never had because they didn't have parents who taught 'em nothin'"

He smiled sadly and then she felt uncomfortable. She cleared her throat. "Um, so what do your parents work as?"

"My dad's a doctor," he said.

"Typical," she half-joked.

He grinned. "See, even you think it. You say your dad's a doctor, people automatically think you're snobby."

"What about your mom?"

"She died a long time ago."

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Melanie said. She meant it.

“Nah, it’s alright. I never knew her.”

“Well, moms aren’t always great. Take it from me,” she said.

He nodded.

“And about you being a snob,” she added. “It’s not personal. I’d be a snob if I were rich.”

“Honestly, I probably am a snob,” he admitted. “In Chicago, I went to private school and it was just a bunch of spoiled brats. Harvard and mission trips to Africa. And every day you go to school and know that a mile away, kids are getting shot, and here you are making plans about saving Nigeria. And then when my dad said we were moving here, I actually thought maybe a small town would be better or more accepting or something. But I was wrong.”

“It’s hard for kids to be accepting here.” Melanie said frankly. “Half our parents are unemployed and on subsidies. The other half work in the mines and wish they were unemployed and on subsidies.”

“It’s tough,” he agreed.

“You just sit and watch kids grow up, families fall apart, and all the while the green mountains crumble.” Suddenly, she remembered herself. “But hey, don’t try and fit in with kids here just ‘cause they’re nasty to you. It’s like you said. You’re never gonna be one of us, so you might as well get through senior year best you can and then get out and go to Harvard. Most people here don’t ever leave and then all they do is complain.”

“Well, they’ve got their families,” Townes said reasonably. “You’ve got to have money to get out and start somewhere new. No friends, no connections. It’s a lot to ask. And the education here doesn’t exactly make it easy to go to college.”

“That’s not stoppin’ me,” Melanie said flatly. “I won’t live my whole life regrettin’ that I never lived.”

“I’m not saying there isn’t the odd-one-out like you who will go out on a limb and take a shot like you,” he said. “But you can’t blame people for staying with their roots. It’s how we’re built. We’re meant to stay together.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she shrugged. “But I also know Bobby Merrin ain’t never leavin’ this town, not because he can’t, but because it’s the hard choice. And Bobby doesn’t make hard choices if he don’t gotta. His daddy’s got a job lined up for him, he’s got his friends here, he knows the guy who owns the diner so he’ll get free fries forever. But one day when this town goes belly up and a forty-year-old Bobby Merrin is cryin’ on the news that he saw it comin’ but couldn’t escape this town, I’ll be sittin’ in some apartment callin’ him on his bull.”

“You’re right-”

“Hell yeah, I’m right-”

“But you should also take a moment to self-reflect and think about why you make the choices you make before you criticize other people.”

She paused for a moment and decided whether or not to be offended. “Yeah, like what?”

“We can start with why you’re so hostile.”

She blew out a big breath. “Low blow.”

“If it makes any difference, everyone else I know is also scared of you, so it’s not just me,” Townes said.

Melanie laughed hollowly. “Look, I’ll have you know I’m not a hostile person in general. I’m just hostile around people I don’t like.”

“Okay, so like, who do you like?”



She faltered. “Well...you’re fine!”

He really grinned then. “If how you act towards me is your idea of friendly, then I’d hate to be your enemy.”

Melanie sighed. “I’m sorry. I’ve been feeling motion sick and I’m freezing. I’m giving you an apology.”

She could see his smile in the dark. “Apology accepted. And why didn’t you say you were cold? I’ve got a jacket-”

“Oh, you don’t have to-”

“It’s fine-”

She could hear him unzipping it in the dark, the leather creaking as he rolled it into a warm ball and handed her.

*God, Melanie. You just had to go and be that girl who says she’s cold and makes the boy give her his jacket, didn’t you?*

But all was forgotten in about five seconds when the jacket was off him and she was toasty warm inside. It smelled like him.

She could hear him rub his hands together and blow into them. “Geez, it *is* cold out here. Forget what I said about being hostile. I wouldn’t have lasted two seconds in that dress.”

She giggled, realizing how much better humored she was now that she wasn’t freezing. The two of them began swaying as he leaned back in the cart. The moon came out from behind a cloud and dipped them in a faint blue light that helped her make out his profile again.

“Here’s another more personal question,” he started. “Why do you want to leave this town so bad? I mean, other than coal dust and heroin.”

“Why?” she asked ironically. “Cause I wanna actually *do* somethin’ with my life.”

“Couldn’t you do that here, though?” he said. “You could make a difference here.”

“Theoretically I could,” she admitted. “But sometimes you need to get out of the place you were raised in order to realize things about yourself and the place you came from. Get an outsider’s perspective, you know?”

“True, but you also have an insider’s perspective on this place that a lot of people don’t,” he said matter-of-factly. “And you’re smart so you could actually make good changes,” he added.

She looked at him in shock. He said she was smart. She felt an intense rush of warmth at the sight of his hair rustling in the breeze. Then, she was overcome with guilt. The wind. He was probably cold now without that jacket. “I’m sorry,” she said distractedly. “You must be cold now.”

He shrugged. “I’m alright. I’m from Chicago, you know?”

She jokingly rolled her eyes at that and smirked at him.

“I bet there are other reasons you want to leave too though, right?” he pressed.

She sat up straighter. “Yeah, like what?”

“Like maybe you act like you don’t care what these people think, but you’re terrified of how this whole town perceives you and so you want to start fresh where nobody has any preconceived ideas about who you are.”

She put her hands in his jacket pockets. “You’re wrong if you think I care what they think. If I cared, don’t you think I’d have friends?”

She now saw the outline of his head shaking back and forth. “No. Everyone I talk to either says they want to date you or be friends with you. I think *you* started rejecting first. And

now you've pushed everyone so far away, you're convinced that nobody likes you when, in reality, it's you who scares everyone off."

She stared at him, aghast. "You don't know the girls here. They hate me because of the boys. Claire bit my head off today which is the only reason I'm here at this stupid carnival."

"Claire? Duncan?" he asked.

Melanie nodded.

"She's obviously just jealous. There's plenty of nice girls at school."

Melanie shrugged. "It doesn't make a difference at this point. If I move away, I'll be around people I want to be around and I can be the best version of myself."

"Maybe you ought to learn how to do that here first," he suggested.

Melanie didn't reply.

"I mean, if you don't like yourself here, why would you like yourself anywhere else?" he asked.

She remained silent, mulling that over.

He cleared his throat. "So, what did you mean when you said that Claire was the reason you came here tonight?"

"Oh, that," Melanie sighed. "Claire cornered me. Bobby saved me. I owed him."

"So you came with Bobby to the carnival." Townes finished.

"Yes," she answered.

"And he let you go on this death trap alone?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You're making me eat my words, Mel. Maybe he is an idiot."

Just then, a voice came over the loudspeaker announcing firefighters would be assembling their ladders momentarily to assist passengers down. Melanie blew out a sigh of relief but immediately felt a twinge of regret. She didn't want to leave him. The boy (he was a boy, one of the best she'd ever met). Townes. Townes Wallace. She'd just had one of her most interesting interactions in years and she didn't want to let him slip through her fingers.

"Hey," she began nervously. "Could I maybe...um...see you again tomorrow?" She spoke with her hands and accidentally brushed his arm. She turned scarlet in the dark.

He cocked his head. "Mel, you couldn't keep me away if you tried. Let's meet at Kipsy's."

"The Bar," she corrected, still blushing. "If you're gonna fit in here...we call it The Bar."

"Fine then," he said. "The Bar."

An ascendancy of triumph rushed inside of Melanie's chest. She sat, suspended hundreds of feet above the ground looking down at the swarms of clowns, freaks, and firefighters below. They all looked the same from her bird's eye view. At that moment, she considered that there was something to be said for the beauty of the present. Wind chattering, the mountains a wedge of the half-moon. She tilted her head back and recollected a line from an old movie she'd watched in Mrs. Collins's class. The main character, (Rick might have been his name?) finished out the film saying, "*Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.*"

With that comforting thought in mind, she leaned her head against the shoulder of a boy who, earlier today, was a complete stranger, and marked the start of the first hopeful summer she could remember in years.