

“Johnny’s Lullaby”

The image is pristine. It plays perfectly, like a film that will never need restoration. My father sitting at the foot of my bed cross-legged, bare feet tucked under his knees, guitar in hand. My bedroom dark except for the night-light just a few feet away from me and the yellow back porch light stretching dimly upward through my bedroom window just behind him, illuminating him. The window wide, summer breeze lifting my father’s dark curls from time to time, the unruly ends of them tickling his sharp jaw-line. His body shadowed, but I can see his fingers dancing over the frets, jumping and landing perfectly on the chords. His chocolate eyes and the white of his teeth glisten as he opens his mouth to sing. “I’d like to be... under the sea... in an octopus’s garden with you,” his voice sliding out of his throat slick and cool as the ice cream I had eaten earlier had gone down mine. I close my eyes and let his music bridge one summer day to the next. Drifting to sleep I see the day behind me: I am barefoot in the tall grass until he scoops me up and carries me squealing with delight into the lake. I will dream us swimming and when I wake we will swim again.

At four years old, that was summer to me, water and his songs of the sea. My first memory. No matter how many years stretched between those days and me, it remained precisely engrained, the first image to come to mind when I thought of my father and the perfect image of him to carry with me.

On the other hand, just two years after breaking up with Johnny Threat, sometimes I didn’t remember him in the way I knew I should. The end of our relationship—the night when he drunkenly held a knife to my side because my band

hadn't shown up at a gig he arranged for us—should have been playing in my mind, not the beginning. I never told anyone about it, not my father, not my best friend, Regan.

After spending a year searching unsuccessfully for Louisa, the mother I had never known, as if maybe she could explain why I had ended up with someone like Johnny, I wound up back with Regan and Tom, my bandmates, in a suburb just outside of Chicago, just a train ride away from where Johnny and I had lived. That's when it started happening: Johnny shoved his way into my dreams again—particularly on the summer nights I lay twisted in my sticky sheets, a hot breeze, which mimicked the sweaty air at River's Edge, the club where we first met, cascading into my stuffy apartment. I remembered our initial, electrifying clash of wills backstage, the crackling power that drove me to sleep with him, to move in with him, to fall.... Yeah, but the image that kept coming back against my will was from before that, from when I dove into the crowd that night. When I do that I can never see—the music, the adrenaline, my hair in my face blurring everything—but I can feel the hands, fingers, knuckles prodding, pulling, and pushing me along. I let myself go limp, ride the current of the crowd like a dead body in a river. But in the memory—dream, whatever it was—my head turns to the right and there, through the waving, pumping hands, is Johnny. I see him in slices that I won't put together until later: silver eyes, the curve of his jaw, the "O" of his lips cheering me on. And then, entwined in his fingers, I see the thing I won't notice I'm missing until I'm back on stage, my necklace, my mother's locket. He is reaching out to me, trying to give it back, pushing past heads and hands, but my body rises up and away on the wave of grasping and releasing fingers.

“Here comes trouble,” Regan’s hazel eyes narrowed, flicking her chin upward to point across the bar at the lanky guy with spiky, champagne-colored hair getting his ID checked at the entrance at the top of the stairs. From what I could see, Johnny looked almost exactly the same as he had when I left him two years earlier, just another skinny boy in a faded t-shirt and jeans. But it was the way he moved—confident, eyes always scouting, curl of his lip when he found what he wanted—that made him different.

“Jesus Christ!” I groaned. “How long have I been in Chicago now? And he has to pick tonight to run into me. To-fucking-night?” It was the long-awaited record release party, the happiest night of my life. We had just gotten off stage upstairs after playing a six-song set that, short as it was, had probably been the most successful show of our career because reps from four major labels were there to see it.

Regan slunk off her stool, dragging me with her. “Well, it figures,” her words gnashed out between gritted teeth.

I followed her through the door that divided the main bar from dance floor, ducking, we hoped, out of his line of vision. “Yeah,” I said bitterly, “it does.”

After enough time had passed, Regan figured Johnny hadn’t seen us, so she could safely go to the bathroom and, after that, find Tom. Of course, Johnny had probably just been waiting for his opportunity.

“What are you doing here, Johnny?” I asked without looking at him, simply feeling his shoulder brush against mine as he sat down at the barstool beside me. I stared straight into the green of my drink, a Midori Sour, its sticky film coating the back of my throat and making it even harder for me to speak without my voice squeaking.

“Like I’d miss the most happening party in Chicago.” I felt his muscled arm rub against mine again as he lifted his hand to signal the bartender. “Jack and Coke,” he told her before she stepped directly in front of him. She flicked her head in acknowledgement, a movement so slight that her ponytail of colorful dreads didn’t even move. Then she turned away again, the pale skin of her arms—what little of it wasn’t inked over by her tattooed sleeves of shredded black lace—illuminated by the dim bulbs that hung uncovered over the bar.

Instead of commenting that he still drank whiskey despite its role in the incident that had broken us up, I scoffed, clearing my sticky-sweet throat in the process, “The after-party for a record release show at Metro is hardly the *most happening* party in Chicago.” My eyes followed the bartender, the drink she slid to Johnny, the dark blue fingernails that pulled his crumpled dollar bills toward her, and then the beer she poured for a tiny red-haired girl down the bar. As the girl turned around, I saw that beneath the straps of her shimmering gold tank top, she had wings tattooed on her back. I watched the wings disappear to the other side of the dance floor where she stood with her friends near the door to the main bar. I wished Regan’s disheveled indigo head would come through the door, Tom towering behind her. I looked everywhere but at Johnny

“I’ve never so many A&R types. It’s got to take something pretty interesting to get them out to see a local band on a Tuesday night.”

“Oh I get it.” I finished my drink in one swallow and swung my bare legs around on my stool, turning to the left to face him. “You, A&R types, flies, shit...” I flung my hand up to try to give my clichéd insult a little more of an impact. My right hand swept past his face, my eyes following it, seeing his sharp features in slices between my open

fingers, trying not to let the disconnected glimpse of him bring back that first memory. In the process, my stubby middle fingernail chipped against the bridge of his nose marring his creamy skin with a little red line. I let my eyes hover on the scratch, but avoided his silver bullet eyes. “I’m fuckin’ out of here,” I said snottily, rocking forward off of the barstool, smoothing the shiny black skirt of my dress as I stood.

“Emily, you’re not going to run out on your own record release party, are you?” His voice was light, teasing me like he used to, little competitive jibes.

My mouth twisted into a cruel smile. “Why not? We just signed a major deal, biggest advance any female-fronted band has seen in a while. They’re already talking distribution deal for this record with the indie label and getting back to the studio to record the next one within a year. I’ve got hundreds of songs in me, Johnny. What about you? I heard you’re still playing the same set from two years ago. Writer’s block? Lack of talent?” I wasn’t normally one to brag. Hearing my voice, my guitar work on the CD blaring from the speakers that night had honestly made me uncomfortable until that moment. Then, I let the choppy guitar riff that kicked off the chorus punctuate my comment like laughter. “Hundreds of songs, Johnny,” I repeated, meeting those gray orbs for the first time, dulled as scuffed marbles by the power of my words. “And you couldn’t compete with a single line or a single riff.”

I tried to storm off, my hair whipping around with me, but he grabbed my wrist and pulled me close against him just like he had that last time he touched me. I winced uncontrollably, my side expecting the tip of a blade. “Emily, please listen to me.” His words, a genuine plea, but I could only react to the whiskey stench they floated down on.

“You can't hold me back now, just like you couldn't then,” I spat. “And this time you don't even have your fucking knife.” I lifted my foot just slightly and planted the sharply-pointed toe of my patent leather high heel just above his sneakered foot.

His hand loosened around my wrist, but he let his body topple forward, leaning over me. “Please, I'm sorry,” his warm lips grazed my ear. “There is something I have to tell you, to explain. Something I've never told anyone.”

So, somehow—probably, much as I hate to admit it, just with that sensation of his lips on my sweaty skin—I let him convince me to go outside to hear his story. I couldn't help the physical draw that was still there, and I knew that the neighborhood would be so busy that he couldn't really get me alone. He walked a few feet off to the left of the door, just outside the glare of the yellow light bulb that hung above it, and headed toward the empty doorway in front of the record shop between Smartbar and Metro. I kept my distance from him at first, walking in the same direction, but standing farther back from the building, hands knotted into fists pressed impatiently against my hips, tapping my foot against the concrete, and rolling my eyes as he leaned against the door, sighing and fumbling for words to an empty apology.

After he phrased it one way, he rephrased, “Ok, that's all bullshit. I fucked up, pure and simple, and it scared the shit out of me, probably more than it scared you. Emily, please, you know what it's like to live with the presence of someone you love who leaves.”

I shook my head in disgust and turned to leave without a word.

“Emily, wait! I'm talking about my dad. My dad and your mom.”

He had always made a big deal out of that, both of us being abandoned by a parent. Maybe talking about it when we first met had bonded us, but I had never thought it had shaped our lives and predestined us for each other like he seemed to think. I spun back around, the slight breeze lifting my skirt so it ballooned out in a bell shape. “Our situations are nothing alike. My mom had her reasons for leaving and I understand them. Your dad just bailed, and you’re still bitter about it.” I sneered at him, satisfied at watching his blond head drop.

“You’re right,” he said tonelessly, “our situations are different. And my dad didn’t bail, my mom threw him out because he was... disturbed.”

“Like father, like son,” I snapped icily, my eyes trailing away from him and up to the marquee where my band’s name was still displayed in large letters.

I started to walk off again, but again his words stopped me. They were soft, completely devoid of any trace of arrogance or sarcasm, a way I had never heard him sound before. “Yeah, you’re right. There’s so little I know about him, but when I woke up in jail after you very rightfully put me there, I realized that somehow I had become him. Every fucked-up thought that that man had in his head, he had handed down to me. Do you know what I mean? I know your mom wasn’t a bad person, but there had to be something about her to leave her family like that... And you wonder so much about a person’s motivations, then you wake up one morning and find you’ve turned into them, but you still don’t understand a damn thing about them or yourself.”

He had my attention. It was like he knew what was going through my head after we broke up when I went running around the country, searching for Louisa, and even before that. I thought about waking up next to Johnny in the mornings, scared to death

that I cared about him, wondering if that was how my mother felt about my father, about me, if that was why she disappeared when I was a baby, and if I would end up like that. As much as I didn't want to admit it, he did understand what it was like to be a kid who got left behind. He got me in that way and no one else did.

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” I rocked back and forth on my heels, my internal argument coming out in my movements: *Stay? Go?* I looked at him sharply. “I would have left you no matter what, you know. That’s what’s I inherited from my mother, leaving.”

Johnny met my eyes, his own glinting like light off a blade, the rest of his face in shadows. “I wish you had done what was in you before I did what was in me.”

Our eyes were still locked, much the way they had been when we had first met except the competition, the daring, had been replaced by vulnerability. I hated vulnerability. “What’d your dad do? Cut up your mom?” I quipped, trying to bring back that dark sarcasm that had always been between us.

Johnny’s eyes darted downward to a piece of glass on the ground. “Naw, he cut me up.” The right side of Johnny’s lip arced up, revealing the white of his teeth, but it quivered into more of a sad smile than a sneer.

My body flashed warm, the heat of summer, the alcohol, his words. “That’s not funny,” I told him, taking a few steps toward him.

“No, it’s not.” Shoulders slumped and expression deadened, he seemed to have lost every sarcastic bone in his body.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.” He lifted his eyes, but he couldn’t bring them high enough to meet mine, they just grazed the bottom of my chin. “Yeah.” Then, he slid down against the door, the sticky glass tugging his t-shirt up slightly as he descended. When he reached a sitting position, he smoothed the shirt and drew his knees up against his chest. Never had I seen him so small, so weak.

I took another tentative step toward him. “You never told me about that.”

“I never told anyone. I didn’t know how to explain it.” He looked beyond me again, his eyes traveling down the street to where it met a side street. His jaw clamped, the words scraping out, “It’s fucked up, Emily. Really fucked up.”

“Yeah, I can imagine.” I rocked forward onto my toes, *stay, go. Stay...* I had cared about him once. I had to know.

I carefully gathered the skirt of my dress and sat down against the door beside him. I stretched my legs, but kept my arms close to my body, making sure that neither my shoulders nor any other part of me touched him. I also kept my eyes off of him, looking down at my bare knees.

Johnny cleared his throat. “He was a fucking doctor, you know that?” his voice crackled like the heat lightning off in the distance by the lake.

“No, you never told me.”

“Yeah, started his first year of residency when I was, like, three. Worked long hours and came home real late, that’s how it is, right?”

I nodded, letting my long hair fall forward into my face. It clung to my skin, which was sticky from moving from the air-conditioned bar to the heat. It had felt like

dry, desert heat when we were hauling our equipment into the club that evening, but now it was humid, damp—heavy air that made your skin feel covered in gauze.

“But he always said goodnight to me. Came in even before he went to his room to see my mom. ‘Goodnight, John,’ he’d whisper. Only person in the world who didn’t call me Johnny. I liked that, it felt like he was speaking to me as an equal. He’d kiss my forehead, put just enough weight on my face to wake me up. He did that on purpose—I thought because he knew how bad I wanted to see him, how I slept with my head facing the door just to hear him come in, but really it was just the beginning of his experiment.”

“What do you mean?” I cocked my head slightly, peering at him through the shield of my hair. He had let his legs slide out in front of him and was fixated on a hole in his jeans—like he was watching the memories being broadcast on a dusty screen in the depths of his brain somewhere, like he could hear the end of the filmstrip flapping as the reel still spun, and then something inside him made it rewind, and play again. Again and again, no matter how much he willed it to stop, disintegrate. But the film had cuts, missing scenes, like the one where the “goodnights” changed from the ones Johnny wouldn’t mind remembering to the ones that scarred. His eyes flickered closed for a moment, skipping to another memory.

“I only tried to talk to my mom about my dad once. I was, like, sixteen. She was in the kitchen making dinner, and I just had this urge to see what she thought about why he hurt me.” He rubbed his guitar-calloused fingers against his chapped lips. “I started talking, but I couldn’t get it all out. I said, ‘My dad, why did he...?’ And I remember she dropped her knife, which clattered into the sink.

“She didn’t turn around, but she finally said, ‘When I met him, he wanted to be a surgeon. He couldn’t pass the tests. Twice. He wanted to retake the classes again, but they said he just wasn’t cut out. Mentally. Too high stress...’ And that was it, she couldn’t say anymore. She just finished making dinner.”

I could see him re-living that night. Staring at his mother, the gray strands in her mahogany hair. The peppers, though not chopped to her usual standards of fineness, sliding from the cutting board into the hot frying pan. The oil jumping and crackling. The smells—sizzling peppers, onions, beef—overwhelming the small, dim kitchen, and Johnny used them to guide himself out of the dank screening room in his mind and back into the present. He shook his head, spiked hair wilted by the heat the same way it had been the night I first met him. “Sounds like me in a way, doesn’t it? Trying to be the best at something I’m just not the best at. You’re good, you’re the musician. I saw you succeeding where I failed, so I acted out, just like him.”

The comparison caused a twinge of guilt. “No, Johnny, you are good. What I said earlier, I was being....”

“Don’t apologize.” His words halted mine, stalled the conversation momentarily, as we listened to the noises of the city, the music and conversation trickling out of the bar. I knew that Regan was looking for me inside, and if she found me with Johnny I wouldn’t hear the rest of the story.

“Hey,” I pushed my hair behind my ear, my eyes searching out his. “You gonna tell me the rest?”

Both of his hands flew up, kneading his forehead, cheekbones, sliding over his mouth. “Yeah. Yeah, you should know. You should know.”

As he spoke, this is how I saw his story unfold. It started happening around Johnny's fourth birthday—at least his mind associated it with that waxy number planted on a chocolate frosted cake and the summer breeze that puffed out the royal blue curtains in his bedroom. His father would come home and into his room to kiss him goodnight as usual, bending over the bed, his lips brushing lightly—lighter than all the previous “goodnights”—against Johnny's forehead. He made sure that Johnny wouldn't wake, that his sleeping lids wouldn't flutter open. His bangs the color of a tawny deer—a color that matched Johnny's own slightly shaggy bowl haircut—hung in a thick sheaf across a prematurely worry-lined forehead, kind, trustworthy eyebrows, and tired gray eyes. Then, instead of tiptoeing across the wooden floor of the small room to leave, Johnny's father let his face slide to the right, feeling the ripple of Johnny's deep, even breathing against his cheek before he slowly straightened his curved spine, stepped over the cardboard clutter of picture books that Johnny had looked at before going to sleep, and took long strides toward the foot of the bed. The curtains from the nearby window flapped inward as he passed, like the protective swirl of a mother's skirts. At the end of the bed, he turned and faced his son once more, his eyes drifting downwards at the sailboat sheets entwined around Johnny's bare legs.

Moments later, feeling a scratch along the bottom of his foot, Johnny awoke, eyelids flickering as hazily as they did when his father's face had been above his wishing him a good night, and then eyes focusing on the blueness of his room. Underwater blue, like pictures Johnny looked at in the encyclopedias on the bookshelf in the living room of deep sea divers swimming the depths with brightly colored fish. The pain in his foot was just a tingle when he first stirred, then it flashed as florescent as the fish that swam out in

the ocean. He tried to peer through the blue to look around his room. He woke up with his head facing the right, as he had fallen asleep awaiting his father's arrival through the door across from his bed. Johnny could see the dresser just to the left of the door—his clothes nicely folded in its drawers by his mother. Then his eyes moved to the shelf of toys to the right of the window—toys he'd stacked haphazardly, some little cars hanging onto the shelf with just two wheels. He listened to the flapping of the curtains, the window open to the buzz of the city; and then as he looked straight ahead, he saw his father kneeling over the foot of the bed, shrouded in the kind of shadows that gave Johnny nightmares. Hunched over Johnny's feet, he held one of them firmly against the mattress, running a blade from the space between the two middle toes to the arch of his foot. That was when Johnny sucked in air, a quick inhale opposite of the deep breathing his father had heard when he first entered the room.

His father noticed this miniscule change in the layer of sound beneath that of the cars periodically accelerating past the open window, and looked up from his etchings, plastic handle of the stolen scalpel wobbling in his usually steady hand. "Dreaming, John," he would whisper, pulling the scalpel away from Johnny's skin momentarily and then running it horizontally across the thick-skinned ball of his son's foot. He spoke in the same soft tones as the "goodnights," the voice from Johnny's earliest memory, a finger pointing above Lake Michigan, "Airplane, John." "Airplane, John." "Lake, John." "Goodnight, John." "Dreaming, John." *Drowning, John.* And out of disbelief that the man who possessed that voice could be the same whose sharp tool now produced the waves of pain, Johnny stayed silent. He focused on the soothing glow of the streetlights streaking through the window into the darkened room and thought about mixing colors

and being a painter. But in the morning when he would slowly peeled the sheets off, see the tiny lines and drawings on the soles of his feet that revealed it hadn't been a dream, he knew he would never make patterns on canvas since his body had been one.

Instead of crying out as his father etched the strange symbols—mostly First Aid crosses or a roughly sketched caduceus—onto his son's little feet, Johnny listened for sounds. He heard the springs of the mattress bending beneath his hands as he shifted his weight ever so slightly to alleviate the cramping in his stiffened legs. He followed the noise of the passing traffic, listened to how the sound seemed to bend as it came closer and then sped away again, like the slide guitar on his mother's blues records. He knew she fell asleep every night listening to those albums just as she listened to them all day, so he strained to hear them. Even though the music had to trickle all the way down the hall from the other end of the apartment, he could hear it, he was sure of it. That barely audible music blanketed the sound of the blade scratching against his skin, which was loud as a car crash if he let himself hear it. As he listened to that music and the music the city outside his window made, he decided to be a musician, and create the noise that hid all the scary sounds, the bad memories, and the voices that drove men who were supposed to be healers to inflict pain.

As Johnny neared the end of his story, we were still sitting against the door, legs straight out in front of us. I had let my shoes drop off, one and then the other landing with a soft tap against the concrete, leaving my feet free to feel the warm breeze that was beginning to stir the air. "I don't know how long it went on. I don't know if he came into my room every night or just a few times a week." Johnny flicked a finger across his long eyelashes. His face was angled down, so I couldn't tell if he was actually wiping away a

tear. I still didn't touch him, but I let my body lean closer towards his, just an inch separating our shoulders.

Johnny looked down at the holes in the knees of his jeans again. The bottom of the hole on the right, closest to me, pursed like pouting lips, creating a dark tunnel of fabric down his leg, which he seemed to be looking into.

“He started cutting the tops of my feet, too, and then my ankles. That's where he screwed up, cutting above my sock line, where my mom could see. But when she asked me what happened, I always said I didn't know, must've scraped my legs somehow. Then, she found an assortment of scalpels in his dresser drawer and put them together with the strange scratches and the little lines of blood that appeared at the bottom of my sheets and in my socks. She kicked him out that day, and I never saw him again.”

“Do you know what happened to him?” I asked.

“No more than you know where your mother is.”

I stared at the dark end of the street, wondering, as I did about everywhere I went, if she had been there. “I don't know, but I picture her places. Where do you picture him?”

“In a dark, cramped, basement apartment that he hardly ever leaves, the psychosis, whatever made him do it, eating him alive.” Johnny's words were punctuated by the match he lit. I was looking down at the little shadows on his knee that the strings from the hole in the jeans created. I listened to him inhale heavily from his cigarette, waiting to see if he was going to say anything more.

“You want one?” he asked, after a few more drags.

I looked up at him, but his face was turned away, all I could see was the sharp profile of his jaw, the hair tumbling toward his eyes, and the cigarette hanging in the corner of his mouth.

“You never could stand it when I had a cigarette and you didn’t, since the day I met you,” he said inflectionlessly, pulling one out of his pack and holding it out to me. His hand hovered just over my thigh, offering me the white cylinder pinched between his thumb and forefinger.

“Johnny, do you have scars?” The words plunged out before I could catch them. I had been wondering about it since the beginning of his story, trying to remember if I had noticed any strange, faint patterns on his skin.

He turned his head slightly, so I could see the lashes dipping down over the dull pewter sheen of his right eye. “I got ghosts of scars. You can look if you don’t believe me.”

“It’s not that I don’t believe you.” I quickly took the cigarette from his still outstretched hand. I stuck it between my lips to prevent myself from saying anything else too quickly, but did not light it. I believed him. His story was too detailed, too horrible, too undeniably real to be made up. Besides, he didn’t have that good of an imagination, nor was he that good of an actor. He couldn’t have faked that sad, empty voice without slipping into sarcasm, even if someone had paid him to do it.

After a moment of silence, he said, “You can look if you *do* believe me, too.”

I hesitated briefly, but then I set the unlit cigarette down and used the wall to push myself up. I kneeled carefully at his feet, smoothing the skirt of my dress so that it stayed tight to my thighs and covered me as I sat back on my heels. The position wasn’t very

comfortable, the uneven concrete digging into my shins and the tops of my bare feet. I unlaced his left sneaker and pulled it off. I glanced up at him before touching his dingy, white sock, certain I could feel his gaze on me, but his head was rested against the building, chin pointed up. His eyes, hidden from me by the darkness and tufts of his hair, seemed to be combing the purple sky for the stars that the lights of the city drowned out.

I removed the sock, bent down farther, his foot almost close enough to my face to kiss it. His sallow skin seemed to take on the sickly yellow hue of the light a few feet off except for the tiny white lines on the top of his foot. They were so faint and disconnected I couldn't see the patterns they had once formed, but as my gaze fell to the inside of his ankle, I saw a crude caduceus in patchy blue ink. My fingers fell on the slightly raised skin, but he didn't seem to feel them. "He did this? I never noticed before..." I had seen Johnny's feet many times, not close enough to notice the tiny scars, but a homemade tattoo?

He let his foot fall to the right, revealing the outline of a knife, a miniature version of his knife, tattooed beside it. "I did that." He lowered his chin, meeting my gaze. "So I won't ever act like him again."

My image of him in the crowd surged forward again, pushing past the prickling sensation in my right side, the physical manifestation of my memory of that night he'd held the knife against me, which had been present since he sat down beside me at the bar. I felt him reaching. Me reaching. We were always reaching, but neither of us quite willing to stop holding back completely. It was too much of a risk to be the one who crossed that small space between us.

I let my fingers dance up his ankle, toward his shin. I lifted my butt from my heels, leaning forward on my knees as I moved my right hand farther up his leg and my left hand along the ground beside him. My chest hovered over his thighs, crawling closer. He pulled the cigarette from his lips, dropping his hands downward, opening his arms to me, but spreading them wide enough that the gesture wasn't obvious.

"EMILY!" The door of the bar slammed opened, bringing a rush of sound—and Regan, with Tom right behind her. "What the hell are you doing?" A blur of blue hair and toned, tattooed arms, she was immediately at my side, pulling me up, away from Johnny.

"We're just talking...." I tried to explain.

"She doesn't have anything to say to you!" Regan snapped at Johnny. His eyes were closed, face expressionless. "Tom, get her shoes. We're leaving."

"No, but..." I objected, trying to look back at Johnny.

Regan spun around, hazel eyes flashing. She pinned my arm against her chest and pushed her face into mine. She was the same height as me since her heels were on and mine off. "No," she growled. "I will not let you do this to yourself. You don't know what you're doing!"

I jerked myself free from her grasp. "I've always known exactly what I'm doing," I hissed through gritted teeth, though nothing could be further from the truth. I snatched my shoes from Tom's hands and lifted one foot at a time, sliding each heel on. Then, I walked over to where I had been sitting beside Johnny and bent down to retrieve the cigarette he had given me earlier. I saw the palm of his hand, fingers spread, pressed firmly against the concrete like it was the only thing supporting him. He had reached out and I instinctually reached back. "We'll talk soon, ok?" I told him quietly because it

seemed like we had so much more to say. Somehow, despite being with him for a year, I hadn't really known Johnny, not beyond the music and the ambition and competition that went along with it.

He nodded his head without looking at me, lifting his cigarette back up to his lips.

I turned to Regan who had her face in her hands, and told her, "Let's go." Even though I didn't want to. I still wasn't entirely sure I should forgive Johnny, but, as risky as it was, part of me wanted to give him another chance.