

LOZING LEAH

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FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK
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This book is dedicated to anyone who has ever felt like the world is crushing them. Our strength is found within and I know that each of us has the power to persevere. We will not let ourselves give in to the shackles that threaten to hold us down. We are stronger than anything that the game of life can throw our way. We are not alone.

PART ONE

1

MIA

POUND.

Smile. Pretend you're fine.

Pound.

Focus. You got this.

Pound.

Don't think about it.

Pound.

Stop being a baby. You've been here before.

"Mia, are you okay?" The voice is familiar, though it sounds like it's coming from the end of a very long tunnel.

I open my eyes, not even aware I'd closed them. I force a smile. My traitorous hand drops from its spot at my temple.

"I'm fine," I lie, though I'm nowhere close to being fine.

Fine is normal. Fine is not having your head split open with an invisible ax. Logically, it was just a headache. Plenty of people got headaches.

Pound.

Screw you, I silently cursed at my head.

It responded with another pound.

“Headache?” My boyfriend, Luke, asked the obvious.

“It’s no big deal,” I lied again.

My recurring headaches started the day my sister, Leah, was taken. They were sporadic. In the beginning I got them all the time. Sometimes they were tolerable and easy to ignore and other times they weren’t.

Pound.

This one happened to be an insistent bastard. I knew what that meant. I’d been here before. Time was short.

“I already know the answer, but do you want me to come in?” Luke asked, pulling up in front of my house. He watched as I rubbed my sore temples, giving away the severity of the headache. I’d never shared the origins of my headaches with him or the things that triggered them. As far as he knew they were brought on because I studied too hard. “Nah, that’s okay. I’ll be fine once I take ibuprofen,” I lied, ignoring the intense pain behind my eyes. I didn’t have much time before the headache would engulf me, leaving nothing but darkness. Most days I could feel the truly bad ones approaching and could prepare, but today’s headache had snuck up on me.

“Thanks for dinner,” I said, giving Luke a quick kiss somewhere near the corner of his mouth before hurrying out of

his car. I pasted just enough of a fake smile on my face to get him to pull away. His reluctance showed that I'd slipped. Tomorrow when I felt better, I'd lie and tell him it was a migraine. That's the diagnosis my doctor gave me years ago. I even had medication to prove it. He didn't need to know the little pills wouldn't help. That they'd never helped.

Pound.

Mother of all pounding suck.

The headache was growing quickly, taunting me from every side. I needed to get in my house sooner than later.

"You won't win tonight," I muttered, standing on my front porch as I fumbled for the keys in my bag. I should have saved time and fished them out while I was still in the car. That was a dumb move. The problem was Leah's disappearance long ago caused my parents to go overboard with security.

Sensors on every door and window.

Front and back doors equipped with enough locks to keep Fort Knox safe.

It was a lame attempt to keep monsters away, but also a huge nuisance.

After several failed attempts and a few choice curse words, I finally matched my keys with the right locks and pushed the door open. Not surprisingly, the house was quiet and empty. Mom and Dad regularly worked late and clearly Jacob wasn't home either. Thank goodness. I loved my brother, but he was a worrier. If he knew how bad this headache was, he would take matters into his own hands, maybe even haul me

over his shoulder and lug me to the emergency room himself. Tonight his absence was a godsend. I could tell this headache was going to be a doozy.

My eyes were already having trouble focusing, which made entering my security code into the keypad by the door more of a chore than it should have been. Luckily, with enough blinking I finished in time, because my throbbing head would have exploded had the alarm gone off. The impending stairs that led up to my room looked as intimidating as a mountain. I slid along the wall for support, flipping on every light switch I passed. I was terrified of the dark. It was smothering and oppressive, like a mystical force trying to squeeze me in its grip. I usually slept with all the lights on in my room, including the night-light that used to belong to Leah. Not that it did much good once my eyes closed. There was simply no escaping the dark.

Pound.

Tiny razor-sharp tentacles were digging their way into my brain.

Fear gripped me.

I began to doubt I would make it to my bed before the shadows consumed me. My feet may as well have been encased in cement, as heavy as they were. Each step I took felt like a hundred.

Pound.

Somehow, I managed to pull my way to the top using the rail, and my foot found the last step. Leaning against the wall, I took a deep breath to gather myself, blinking over and

over again to maintain focus. My room was at the end of the hall, but it looked like it was three football fields away. I needed to get to my bed. Everything would be tolerable if I could just make it there.

I shuffled down the hall like a zombie. “Almost there,” I said, counting the steps in my head. Ten more and I would reach my door. Five more after that and my bed would be within reach. I wouldn’t allow myself to think about the times in the past I hadn’t made it. My energy and focus were better spent moving forward.

Four steps to my room. If it wasn’t for the wall, I would have been on my ass already. The shadows were beginning to bleed together. I was almost out of time. I wasn’t going to make it. Panic began to claw its way up my throat.

Two steps. I was so close and yet my head felt like a grape being squeezed in a vise.

One step. I could no longer see. Reaching out blindly, my hand closed around my doorknob. My body weight pushed the door open and I fell forward into my room, collapsing on the floor. Even if I’d had the strength to crawl to my bed, I doubted I could have pulled myself up anyway. Rolling over on my back, I closed my eyes, letting the darkness take hold. *You win* was my last conscious thought.

• • •

“Earth to Mia—are you in there?” Amber, my best friend in the world, asked the next day, rapping her fingers on my locker to get my attention. I was too busy searching for my Spanish book to answer right away.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” I asked, unearthing my book from the cluttered mess that was my locker.

“I said, how’d you do on the test?”

“Not bad,” I finally answered as I slammed my locker closed before any other books could escape. “I think I probably passed.”

“Oh, please. You know you aced it. Since when do you not screw up the grading curve for the rest of us? I swear if I had a time machine I’d go back and smack the guy who came up with the idea to mix letters and numbers together and call it math. Obviously it was some sadistic plot to separate the brains from the morons in the world,” Amber joked, shouldering her book bag. “One day you’ll be working in some lab figuring out the secrets of the universe and I’ll be asking people if they want paper or plastic. Unless I bag a rich dude, of course.”

I laughed, elbowing her in the arm. “As if bagging a rich dude hasn’t always been your plan. Besides, you’ll be some starlet in Hollywood, going to all the cool parties. Everyone will want to be your friend and you’ll forget about the nerd you befriended way back in elementary school.”

Amber linked her arm through mine. “I wouldn’t count on it. Best friends for life, right? Anyway, you know all my secrets. I could never dump you.” She giggled.

“Best friends for life,” I confirmed, smiling as we side-stepped a questionable wet spot on the polished linoleum floor on our way to her locker.

Luke and Anthony (Amber’s newest boy toy—her words, not mine) were already waiting at her locker by the time

Amber and I made it through the herd of students who all seemed as eager as we were to get to lunch.

“Sup, babe. Inside or out?” Luke asked, dropping a peck on my lips as he slung his arm across my shoulders.

I shook my head. Same joke. Different day. He knew I preferred to eat lunch outside beneath the sun and clouds, but he still asked. He thought he was being cute. He was right, of course, but telling him that would only inflate his ego. “Outside, of course,” I answered. “I need to get my lunch, but I’ll meet you guys at the normal spot,” I said, smiling brightly at him.

“I’m coming too. You know you’ll need help carrying the buffet table,” he teased, making Amber snort with laughter. Anthony shot us a mystified look. This was only his second lunch with us and he’d yet to witness what my legendary stomach could hold when I wanted to pack it away.

The cafeteria line was busy as always, but Luke and I barely noticed as we talked about the upcoming football game on Friday. I paid for my lunch while he stressed about the college scouts that would be at the game and the importance of standing out. He was nervous. It was kind of adorable. He had nothing to worry about. Football came as natural to him as breathing, but if a little reassurance was what he needed to get pumped up for the game, I was more than happy to oblige my guy.

Amber and Anthony were at our normal spot outside when we finally made it from the cafeteria with Luke carrying two trays of food.

“Aw, what a gentleman—carrying your lady’s tray too? Does he carry your purse also?” Anthony asked me, laughing at his own joke.

“When I’m wearing a matching shirt I do, and actually they’re both hers, dickhead,” Luke said, laughing as he placed the trays on the table. “I brought a lunch,” he continued, pointing to the modest bag I held in my hand.

“Shut up.” Anthony’s eyes moved from Luke’s face to mine, obviously thinking we were messing with him.

“I’m serious, bro. I got ten bucks though if you don’t believe me.”

“I wouldn’t do it,” Amber chimed in. “She can eat, like, twice her own body weight.”

In typical alpha-male fashion, Anthony wasn’t about to back down from a challenge. “Whatever. You guys are messing with me, and I’m calling your bluff,” he said, slapping his money on the table.

“Suit yourself,” I said, picking up my double cheeseburger with everything.

“I feel like I got hustled,” Anthony said twenty minutes later as I popped the last French fry into my mouth. He’d watched incredulously while I plowed through a slice of pizza, the cheeseburger, fries, a chocolate chip cookie, and a pudding.

“Don’t sweat it. You’re not the first,” I joked, downing the last swig of my Coke.

“I feel full just from watching you. Totally worth the money though.” He laughed, rubbing his stomach.

Amber rolled her eyes. “Believe me. If she wasn’t my best

friend, I'd hate her. I'm living on salads until football season ends. I'd give my left leg for a slice of pizza," she said, running a finger over my empty plate to capture a lone droplet of pizza sauce.

"I can help you burn off some calories if you need to," Anthony said, sliding his arm around her waist.

She slapped him on the arm. "I bet, you perv. I'm serious though. If Joshua drops me on my ass one more time, I'm going to throat-punch him."

"Maybe Luke should try out for the squad," I teased. "He'd never drop you," I added, giving Luke's bicep a squeeze. "What do you think? You ready to trade your football cleats for pom-poms?"

"I'd totally rock the skirts," he said, hiking up his shorts to flash us his hairy thighs.

"You'd have to wax that fur off, Wolfman Luke," Amber said, munching on her last carrot. "Why don't you come over to my house on Friday? Mia and I can get you all buffed and smooth."

Luke shook his head exuberantly. "Hard pass. I've seen what my mom looks like after she gets her eyebrows waxed. I'm out on that sadistic ritual."

"Aw, big tough football player afraid of a little girly wax," Amber cooed, making us both giggle.

"Give me a concussion any day. Right, my man?" Luke asked, looking to Anthony for support.

Anthony shrugged. "It's not all that bad," he admitted sheepishly.

Amber's eyes lit up with merriment. "You wax?" She chortled. "Where?" she asked, tugging on his shorts for a peek.

Anthony's face flushed bright red like he wished he'd kept his mouth closed.

"Gotta be the legs," I guessed, ducking under the table to check them out for myself.

"No, not my legs," Anthony answered, looking more uncomfortable by the second.

Amber and I exchanged an amused look. "You don't mean your boys, do you?"

"Say it isn't so," Luke said, shaking with laughter.

"Come on, man. You know there's no way hot wax is going anywhere near a guy's precious cargo," he choked out. "It's my pecs," he finally admitted.

"Your pecs?" Amber asked, raising an eyebrow. "You have hairy pecs?"

"It's not like I was Bigfoot or anything. I lifeguard over the summer and I like looking good." He blushed again, much to our amusement. "Now you know and we can change the subject."

"Not on your life," Amber teased. "We wanna see for ourselves."

"Absolutely," I added. "Show us the hairless wonder."

The halls were buzzing with activity as everyone scrambled to get to class before the fifth-period bell rang. "I'll meet you at the library after practice," Luke said, giving me a chaste kiss. "By the way, you look better today."

“I feel better. It was just a migraine. You know I get them sometimes.”

“You study too hard.”

“One of us has to,” I teased, trying to take the focus off my head.

“Ouch, I’m wounded,” he said, clutching his heart, making me giggle as he headed off to his afternoon classes.

Still smiling, I watched him leave. Today was a good day. My headache from the night before was long forgotten.

I was once again me.

A typical, normal teenager.

The twin who’d been left behind.

I was six years old when Leah disappeared from our front yard. I went inside to fetch us the cherry ice pops we both liked, and when I returned, she was gone without a trace. We were identical in every way, including our tastes in food. Where one of us ended, the other began. She was the other half of me, until in one instant, she wasn’t. She was gone, along with my life as I knew it. Nothing was ever the same after she disappeared. How could it be? You keep doing the everyday things that make you a person—eating, breathing, moving. Some days you even kid yourself and pretend everything is okay, but deep inside your soul, you stop living the moment you lose the other half of yourself.

For the past ten years my family has pretty much gone through the motions at home. Holidays, birthdays—they basically come and go without any real hoopla. School has

been my only solace. It provides sanity, purpose, an identity. At school I'm just Mia Klein. Not Mia Klein, the girl whose twin sister disappeared. To my friends, I stopped being that person long ago. The world moved on at school, while at home we remained shackled by the past.

2

LEAH

EVEN WITH my eyes closed I could tell the lights were on. I could hear the soft familiar hum of the fluorescent fixture hanging on the ceiling above my head. I wasn't ready to wake up yet. Not after the dream I'd had. The sun warming my skin. Gentle, flower-scented breeze playing with my hair. I missed it already.

As badly as I wanted to stay in bed, I knew I had to move quickly. She was already coming down the stairs and if she found me with my eyes closed, the day would start off bumpy. For now, the last remnants of my dreamtime escape would have to be tucked away in the back of my mind to be savored later. In one swift movement, I swung my legs off the small twin bed and jerked myself upright just as she entered the room. That was close. A second more and she would have freaked.

Stopping at the bottom of the steps, she hung the menacing leather strap in her hand on its usual spot on the hook just outside the doorway. My eyes drifted to the strap for the briefest of moments. That would have been my fate had she walked in and caught me still lying in bed. At least I had managed to avoid its sting first thing in the morning. If I was good the rest of the day, maybe I wouldn't have to endure it at all. I was already on the longest stretch I could remember without an incident. Of course, now I'd probably tempted fate and jinxed myself.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, giving me the once-over before heading to the dumbwaiter she kept padlocked except during mealtimes.

"Yes," I answered, pulling the blanket up on my bed and smoothing it out with my hand.

She paused, staring me down with a dead-eyed sternness. "Yes, what?"

"Yes, Mother," I answered.

"Do we need to cover manners again?" She made her point by indicating the leather strap hanging within her reach.

I shook my head, keeping my eyes purposely averted from hers. Any display of defiance would only elicit severe punishment. It was better to ignore the taunting reminder of my weakened will. "No, Mother," I said, casting my eyes to the ground in obedience. It had taken me a long time and countless beatings to get to this point.

In the beginning, I wept for my family, begging to be returned to them, but my captor's anger was swift. I fought the

foreignness of my surroundings until eventually I lost every speck of my former identity. The monster who punished me time and time again slowly transitioned until she became *Mother*. When the flesh-eating leather strap didn't stop my tears, she would retaliate by giving me a shot in the arm. I spent most of my first few months in a dark slumber. Wonderful blissful darkness that allowed me to escape my harsh reality. She thought she was punishing me, but I grew to love the darkness. I coveted it.

"Very well. You can set the table," Mother finally said with pursed lips. "Did you sleep well?"

Obviously I had been forgiven for my faux pas. At least the day remained on the right track. "Yes, ma'am," I answered, reaching into the tiny cupboard above a single sink that sat against the wall near our dining table. I pulled out two plates and two glasses and sat them on the table. Our utensils were kept in the small drawer beside the sink. Mother unlocked the dumbwaiter and extracted the serving tray she used for our food. I then carried the tray to the table while she relocked the dumbwaiter door, giving the lock two tugs to make sure it was fastened. It was the same regimented routine day after day, unless of course I did something that deserved punishment.

The dumbwaiter had a lock for my benefit. When I was nine, I shimmied up the rope. My arms shook from exertion, but I finally made it to the top. I don't know what my plan was if I made it to the kitchen. Maybe just a glimpse out the window at the sun or a blue sky filled with cottonlike clouds.

The issue was Mother never allowed me to go outside. She said I suffered from a severe case of photosensitivity, an allergic reaction to the sun that would affect my immune system. At the time I guess I didn't care. I slid the dumbwaiter door open to find Mother waiting for me with a shot in hand. I don't remember much of what happened after that, other than when I woke up the dumbwaiter door had the new lock installed.

"You may use the bathroom," Mother said once the table was set and the food was in place.

"Thank you, Mother," I murmured, walking sedately to the bathroom though my bladder was screaming for release. The bathroom had no door, but was separated from the room with a single curtain. It offered little privacy, but I was always thankful for anything.

Once my bladder was empty, I stood at the sink and squirted a liberal amount of industrial soap in my hands. Mother was a nurse who had seen her share of unnecessary sicknesses brought on by a lack of cleanliness. She was fanatical about germs. Hands were to be washed and scrubbed thoroughly on the front and back sides, making sure to get under the nails. I went through the motions without a second thought. I'd done it thousands of times before.

Our meal was simple. Eggs, toast, one slice of bacon, and a glass of orange juice. Obesity claimed over a hundred thousand lives per year. Even though I had a slight figure, Mother wasn't willing to take any chances. Over the years I had learned to eat my food slowly, savoring each bite. My lunch

would be a sandwich and a piece of fruit that already sat in a brown paper bag on the counter. It was my choice when to eat it, but it was all I got until Mother joined me for dinner. Patience was a virtue forced on me.

“Before I go to sleep I want to check over your schoolwork from yesterday,” Mother said as I finished the last sip of my orange juice. “Did you complete your algebra equations?”

“Yes, ma’am. They were easy,” I said, beaming with pride when she smiled at me.

“That’s good. Math is an important skill. What about science? Did you finish your gravity formulas?”

I nodded, standing up to clear our empty plates from the table. With a little dish soap and the washrag, I cleaned and dried our dishes, handing over any of the items that belonged upstairs.

I joined Mother on the small couch where she was going over my class work. I knew everything was right. The answers came to me easily.

“Everything looks good,” Mother said, closing up the file. “You will continue on conjugating verbs today in English, and I want you to finish your paper on the Civil War.” She stood up. A small kernel of relief blossomed like a flower in my chest. Mother had always stressed the importance of education and it was one of the ways I could always please her. “I will see you at dinnertime. You may shower today, but no longer than five minutes. I will know if it is longer.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, standing with her.

She pulled me in for a brief hug. “You’re a good girl.”

I obediently returned the gesture. “Thank you,” I said, readily accepting the praise. Hugs from Mother were a treat and few and far between. A warm tingle spread throughout my body. Making her happy was my one and only goal. I treasured these moments. They were my reward for being good.

As if she could read my thoughts, Mother stiffened and abruptly dropped her arms. The mood of the room changed to dread, like storm clouds moving in before a thunderstorm. I panicked, quickly going over the events of the morning in my mind in a dire search for any mistakes I had made. I knew I only had moments to figure it out and apologize for my transgression.

She stepped back, reaching for the strap I knew all too well. My time was up.

What did I do? What did I do? I racked my brain for an answer, but came up empty. What was I missing? It must have been something really bad. Mother hated to punish me. She had told me time and again that she only did it for my own good.

“Leah, what is that on your ceiling?” she asked, looking toward my bed with the strap in hand.

“My sun,” I whispered, suddenly realizing the mistake I’d made. How could I forget to take it down? It was a weak sun anyway, hardly worth the price I would have to pay. I drew it in lemon-yellow crayon like a little kid and cut it out in a perfect circle with my plastic scissors that were useless for anything more than the thinnest piece of paper. It hung over my bed using two thumbtacks I had found years ago and

kept hidden. I only wanted it to shine down on me while I slept.

“Your sun?” Mother asked in a shrill voice. “Do you miss the sun?” she shrieked, making me flinch. “Do I need to remind you of what the sun does to you? Or the fact that your own parents abandoned you because of your illness?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Then why would you hang one above your bed? You want to leave me, don’t you? You can’t wait to leave me all by myself.” The leather strap followed her words, tearing at my body before I could protect myself. It snapped across my back like a streak of fire.

“No, Mother,” I pleaded. “I don’t want to leave you. I promise,” I cried out as the harsh strap found my bare legs. My flesh tore away with every strike, leaving white-hot, painful, bloody contusions. “Mother, I love you.”

She stopped in mid-swing, gasping from her anger-induced exertion. “You promise you won’t leave me.”

“I promise,” I answered. It took all my strength to stop myself from whimpering as I spoke. Crying would only antagonize her again. Mother did not like to see tears. “I love you,” I continued. The words felt hollow and disingenuous, but they were what she needed to hear. It was more my fault anyway. I should have remembered to take the picture down.

All of Mother’s anger evaporated as quickly as it had surfaced. She pulled me in for a remorseful, tight hug. Inside I was screaming in pain as her arms circled the open wounds

on my back, but I couldn't show it. I had gotten what I deserved.

"I love you too. I wish you wouldn't make me punish you," she said, pulling away.

"I'm sorry. I'll take the sun down."

She nodded, refusing to look again at the offending scrap of paper. "You understand why it upsets me?"

"I do. It was wrong. I shouldn't want anything to do with something that could hurt me so severely," I said, parroting the words I'd heard hundreds of times before.

She leaned over and kissed my forehead. "Good girl. Go take your shower," she said, shooing me toward the bathroom. "I think an extra five minutes will be okay," she added, smiling brightly like nothing had happened.

I responded to her smile instantly. Mother was a different person when she was happy. "Thank you," I said, closing the curtain behind me.

As I stripped out of my pajamas, I could hear her footsteps walking up the hollow staircase, followed by the sound of the dead bolts locking on the basement door. I switched on the shower and turned the water to a lukewarm setting. I braced myself before stepping inside, knowing that the water wouldn't feel much better on my tender skin than the leather strap that left me scarred. By now you would think I'd be used to the pain. Only when my head was under the flow of water did I allow the tears I'd been holding back to fall freely. In the shower they were not tears, but merely water from the showerhead, lost among the other drops of water combined

with blood that circled the drain before disappearing forever. I couldn't cry for long though, and use up my precious minutes of shower time. The shower was one of the few times I felt like I was somehow in control. I got to pick whether the water was hot or cold. How much soap or shampoo to use. As long as I stayed within Mother's allotted time, I was the queen of the shower.

My mind wandered elsewhere while I scrubbed my skin that felt rough to the touch, calloused and scarred several times over after years of punishment. I never dwelled on the scars or what I had done to deserve them. The only important thing was that Mother had forgiven me. My living quarters were once again peaceful when I left the bathroom. Mother worked nights while I slept and then she would sleep during the day while I did schoolwork and read. She used to spend more time with me when I was younger, serving as the teacher for my elementary homeschooling years. As I got older I did the majority of my lessons on my own and she only checked my work. Any questions I had, I saved for dinnertime when she and I could discuss them. As for my spare time, I usually read or listened to music as long as Mother approved of my choices. Anything I knew about the outside world I learned through the countless books I'd read. My own memories of life outside my room were hazy and in most circumstances, gone.

I dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, placing my neatly folded pajamas at the foot of my bed. The bloodstains that covered them would be painful reminders of my transgressions that

would taunt me until Mother saw fit to launder them. She had obviously come back down while I was showering, because my drawing and the two tacks were gone. In a way I felt sad, but there was no point in grieving over a piece of paper. It was nothing. Well, it ruined my streak of good behavior, so I guess it was something after all. Now I had to start over again.

I dolefully worked at conjugating verbs and then finished my Civil War paper before lunch. My goal was to have more time to read. Mother had never been one to buy me toys when I was younger; reading had become my biggest luxury. As long as I did my schoolwork and kept my living quarters tidy, I could have all the time I wanted. One entire wall of my room was lined with bookshelves. Mother had brought me cartons and cartons of books over the years and I devoured every one. It didn't matter what genre they were. They were my window to the outside world. Books fed my dreams at night and gave me the freedom of imagination.

My current read was about a girl who lost her memory. It had suspense and intrigue with a little romance mixed in. I enjoyed trying to solve the puzzle even though I didn't want to spoil the surprise at the end. The main character had amnesia, which in some strange way was something I envied. Being able to forget your troubles sounded appealing. I also liked the portions of the book that took place in a school. Since I've never been allowed to leave the basement, I had never interacted with anyone my own age. No school dances. No parties. No sleepovers. Nothing. It made me wonder if

I could relate to normal people. When I closed my eyes I could almost imagine walking through the halls, chatting with my very own friends. Maybe I would have a boyfriend or maybe I would even be a cheerleader.

I looked up at the piece of plywood that covered up the only window in the room. A smile tugged at my mouth, but I made myself return back to my book and the world that belonged among the pages.

3

MIA

I **THREW** off my covers, happy to have my head still free of the darkness from the other night. Judging by the morning sunlight peeking through the blinds, I was already running behind. I rolled over to glance at the clock, seeing that I had barely enough time to get ready before Jacob left for school. He would wait for me, but I didn't want him to be late. I showered in record time and pulled on my favorite jeans and shirt before grabbing my backpack and heading downstairs.

Jacob was standing at the kitchen counter with his cereal bowl tipped up to his mouth, slurping the rest of his milk. For whatever reason, that noise had always grossed me out. "God, Jacob. Get a straw or something," I said, wrinkling my nose as I popped two packages of Pop-Tarts into the four slots of the toaster.

“Ahhhh,” Jacob said, wiping his mouth with his arm before placing his bowl in the dishwasher.

“Could you be any more of a slob?” While I waited for my Pop-Tarts, I grabbed a bottle of chocolate milk from the fridge. Normally I’d snag a piece of fruit too, but I knew I wouldn’t have enough time to eat everything during the drive.

Jacob watched in amusement as I gathered my belongings, trying to balance my breakfast and my backpack together. “Isn’t the older brother supposed to do all the eating in the house?”

I smirked at him. “Don’t be jealous,” I said, stacking one strawberry Pop-Tart on top of a blueberry one before taking a big bite. I liked mixing flavors.

Jacob rolled his eyes, but didn’t deny my claim. He was a wrestler and had to maintain a strict diet to make weight. “So, are we going to talk about the other night? It looked like a rough one,” he said, doing me a favor by carrying my backpack.

I shrugged, glancing over at the empty chairs in the living room as we left the kitchen. “Are they awake?”

“Yeah. Mom came down for coffee earlier. She asked about you. I haven’t seen Dad yet though,” Jacob said.

“Tell her I said hi,” I answered sarcastically.

At one time the living room had been the life force of the house, with pictures of babies and toddlers littering the walls. The furniture was sturdy and perfect for making forts. That was when the room was filled with love.

After Leah's disappearance Mom cleaned out the room in a rampage, ripping out everything, including the flooring. The shag carpet was replaced with cold slabs of tile. Stark white paint covered up the bright yellow walls along with all the holes from the pictures that were taken down. The furniture was replaced with stiff chairs and furnishings that no longer welcomed children.

I remember at that time overhearing Mom weeping on the phone to my aunt Cindy that Leah's doll, Daisy, had been found. The authorities no longer believed that Leah was alive. I was so confused and too young to understand the true gravity of what had happened. I knew my heart ached and that I missed my sister, but wouldn't I have felt it if my twin was gone? We'd shared a special connection. I couldn't believe that she was truly gone.

"You should tell Mom and Dad how bad the headaches are getting," Jacob said as we climbed into his car. "Maybe they need to change your medication."

"It wasn't all that bad," I lied, polishing off my Pop-Tarts and taking a big swig of chocolate milk. I neglected to mention that it was my second severe one in three days. That was a need-to-know info drop and Jacob definitely didn't need to know.

Stopping at the corner of our street, he looked at me with his signature glare of annoyance. "Puh-lease. How dumb do you think I am? Two nights ago I find you passed out on the floor. Maybe you're not aware of this but normal headaches don't do that. Look, I let the matter slide yesterday because I

got home late from wrestling practice, but now this is some serious shit, Mia.”

“Maybe I like to sleep on the floor,” I said dryly, looking out the window. I wondered what he would say if he knew the truth. He knew about the headaches, but nothing about the darkness that came with them that always terrified me. I didn’t want him to think I was crazy, and I definitely didn’t want him to tell Mom or Dad. They were just headaches. That’s all. A small part of me wished they were more though. When I was little I believed they were a bond between Leah and me. I knew it was silly but I felt the headaches connected me to her.

“Mia?”

“Jacob, I’m fine. Can we just drop it, please?” I pleaded, imploring him with my eyes.

I could tell by the look on his face that he wanted to press harder. He took a deep breath, reaching over to pat my knee. “Sure, Mia, we can drop it.” Jacob was overly protective where I was concerned. “Do you need a ride to the football game tonight?” he asked, pulling into the student parking lot.

“Um, maybe,” I said, opening my car door. “Luke has to be there early and Amber has practice before the game. I might just stay after school though. I can always spend the time studying in the library.”

“Sounds good. Just let me know, okay? Valerie wants to double, but I don’t want to commit if you need me.”

I took my backpack from him and slung it over my back. “You should tell her yes. I don’t mind staying after.”

“And I don’t mind giving you a ride,” he returned, jumping ahead to open the door for me as we approached the entrance of the school.

“I know you don’t, but seriously, it’s okay. I like Valerie. You should come hang out with us,” I added. “Luke and I are doubling with Amber and Anthony after the game.” I stepped around a couple making out just inside the door. The hallway was loud and chaotic just the way I liked it. Jacob made a face at my invitation. “What—you don’t like Anthony?”

He shrugged. “Not particularly. He used to be on the wrestling team until he got all pretty and became a lifeguard,” he said with disgust.

I chuckled, wondering if I should share what I had learned yesterday about Anthony and his pecs. The first bell rang. “Oops, I better go,” I said, shoving the last of my Pop-Tart into my mouth. I’d have to tell him about Anthony’s waxing routine later.

I ended up declining Jacob’s invitation for a ride that afternoon. Instead I spent my time in the library working on my statistics homework. The library emptied out quickly after seventh period, but Miss Nelson, the librarian, knew me well and didn’t mind that I stayed. She always hung around until after five anyway. Eventually, I trudged through my statistics homework and jumped on one of the computers to research a paper I had due in world history, but I couldn’t bring myself to concentrate any further. The nagging feeling that I always seemed to struggle with began to dominate my thoughts again. My fingers danced curiously over the

keyboard before typing the words “twin bonds” into the search engine.

The screen finished loading, displaying multiple search results. I clicked on the first link, not sure of what I was looking for. Was I trying to prove that my pain was actually Leah’s? Could she feel anything about me? Maybe I was going crazy or at the very least I was being selfish. Leah had most likely died ten years ago and I was blaming her for my unexplained headaches. But what if Leah wasn’t dead? What if she was just a regular girl going to school somewhere, living her life without having ever known that she had ever been abducted? I let the fantasy play out in my head for a few minutes. Maybe Leah was a cheerleader or goth, or maybe she was a brain like me.

Unfortunately, reality was harsh, and the fact of the matter was that if Leah were alive somewhere there would likely be nothing normal about her. She would know she was taken. If she could she would have reached out to us. Something in my heart told me Leah would do everything in her power to get to us. If she were free to do so.

There was no scenario that wasn’t depressing to consider. Without clicking on any other links, I shut down the computer. Whatever answers I was searching for wouldn’t come from the internet. I gathered up my things and waved at Miss Nelson before heading out. I figured I would go to the football field early to watch the players warm up and enjoy the last rays of sun. It would suck when daylight savings time ended. It never felt right for the sun to set by six. My favorite time of

year was the summer months when the sun would shine until after eight every night.

My shoes slapped against the floor as I walked, echoing off the empty walls in the hallway. The noise was eerie. I picked up my pace, wishing the library wasn't at the far end of the building. I rounded the corner, relieved to be nearly outside. With all the lights off, every empty classroom I passed was darker than I was comfortable with. The sun may have still been out, but it was no longer shining on the side of the building where I was at. My eyes stared straight ahead, avoiding the long shadows in the classrooms cast by the furnishings. It felt silly to be afraid of the dark at sixteen years old, but my headaches had manifested the dark into something frightening.

Making my way past the science labs, a sudden noise coming from one of the rooms caused me to jump and I nearly dropped my bag. "Hello," I called out, clutching my heaving chest. If someone was trying to frighten me, I was prepared to lay them out. I was short, but tough. Jacob had been giving me self-defense lessons for years. I could put someone twice my size on their ass.

A faint scratching from the far corner of the room was the only response to my greeting. I stepped closer, peering as far into the room as I could without actually going inside. The darkness was heavy and impenetrable. I backed away slowly, pausing suddenly when it looked for a moment like the shadows moved. I stood like a statue. "Is anybody there?" I asked, getting no response.

Blinking my eyes, I focused on the spot I thought had moved when all of a sudden the shadows appeared to rise from the floor. They gathered together into one giant mass, moving toward me. I tried to turn and run, but my feet refused to respond. My brain literally screamed inside my head to move, and yet I remained frozen. The darkness slithered toward me like a snake, void of any light. A scream clawed its way up my throat as terror held me in place.

Move, a voice shrieked in my mind. I clamped my eyes closed, expecting the darkness to suck me in as it moved closer and closer. My heart roared in my eardrums like a freight train. *Move*, my mind shrieked again.

I forced my eyes open to find that the darkness had disappeared back into the shadows of the classroom. I blinked again to be sure, working to catch my breath as my chest pounded. “Nice going, you dork,” I said, chastising myself. I couldn’t believe I allowed my imagination to get the better of me. They were only shadows.

After a few more deep breaths, I was able to get my heart-beat back under control. I whirled around, anxious to get outside in the light and away from the dark classrooms. Everything inside me wanted to turn and look over my shoulder as I hurried down the hallway, but I fought the urge. It felt like a million eyes were on me, all whispering as I passed.

Reaching the heavy metal door at the end of the hall, I shoved it open, gulping the warm outside air like I’d been submerged. My lungs burned as I heaved in and out. Clearly I had held my breath while I raced down the hall. All thanks

to my overactive imagination. If Jacob saw me now there was no way he would keep quiet.

The more distance I put between me and the building, the more ridiculous I felt. Between my headaches and being chased by shadows, I was practically begging for a trip to the doctor.

Amber and the rest of the cheer squad were already on the football field in front of the bleachers when I arrived. She waved at me before rolling her eyes at Trinity who was barking orders at the top of her lungs. I flashed an exaggerated thumbs-up, climbing to an empty seat on the third row where I'd have a better view of the action.

The metal bleachers were warm from the sun beating down on them all day. It was just one of the perks of living in a warm-weather climate. In other parts of the country people were probably already wearing jackets instead of shorts and T-shirts like we could.

“Did you see Joshua almost drop me again?” Amber asked, joining me while the squad took a break. “If he drops me tonight there’s no telling where my foot might wind up, so make sure you’re watching because it’ll be good.” She took a swig from her water bottle, waiting for me to comment. “You okay?” she asked.

“Sure, why?”

She pursed her lips, studying me intently for a moment. “I don’t know. You look off or something.”

I laughed, hoping it didn’t sound as hollow to her as it did me. “Off? What does that even mean?” I asked, giving her a shove on the shoulder. “Are you a psychiatrist?”

She continued to watch me critically. “Say what you want, but I’ve known you too long. Did you and Luke get in a fight?”

“No. I’m fine, seriously. I think Trinity is trying to flag you down though,” I said, nodding toward the rest of the cheer squad who were lining up in formation. I adored Amber and her intuitiveness, but I didn’t want it directed at me. I had enough weird stuff happening without bringing Amber into the mix.

Amber looked like she wanted to say more, but Trinity blew her whistle stridently in our direction. “God, I’m going to shove that damn whistle down her throat. Maybe then it’ll be less annoying,” Amber grumbled, stomping down the bleachers.

This time my laugh was more genuine. I could easily see Amber making good on her promise.

By the time our team ran out on the field for warm-ups the bleachers had begun filling in around me. I flagged down my friends Tina and Jen when I saw them searching for a spot to sit.

“Girlfriend,” Tina said, hugging me as she sat down. “I hope we slaughter Winter Park tonight, especially since they kicked our asses last year,” she added, sticking her feet up on the row in front of us.

“Didn’t you date that guy, Russ, from Winter Park over the summer?” I asked.

Jen giggled on the other side of her. “That’s right. You did. He was a doucheball too. You should go sit on the other side of the field, traitor.”

“A momentary lapse in judgment. Besides, he had a nice butt and I didn’t know what an asshole he was until I went out with him. Plus, he was dumb as rocks.”

“Football players usually are,” Jen agreed.

“Not true. Luke’s GPA is almost as high as mine,” I said, standing up and cheering as the teams lined up for kickoff.

Talking became impossible once the game started. The crowd was charged into a near frenzy. Winter Park was our school’s biggest rival. They were notorious for playing dirty. Last year they clipped Jimmy Clausen, our quarterback, in the ankle when the refs weren’t looking. He sat out the rest of the game and the season with a broken ankle, ending our chances at state. Tonight was about retribution.

By halftime my throat was raw from cheering after Luke caught a long pass and ran it in for a touchdown, putting us up by seven points. Amber and the cheer squad did their parts too by keeping the crowd energized. Somehow Joshua and Amber managed to work out their kinks because I didn’t see him drop her once. Little did he know he had saved himself from a throat punch, at least for one half of the game anyway.

“You’re so lucky,” Tina yelled into my ear when Luke caught another long pass. “Luke is the whole package. Cute and a football god. If we weren’t friends I’d totally hate you.”

“And probably try to steal him,” Jen chimed in.

“I’m not that much of a bitch,” Tina protested. “Now, if they’re on a break it’s open season.”

“Well, paws off. Luke is mine,” I said, giving her a nudge

with my hip. “I’m short, but I fight dirty,” I added, holding my fingers up like claws. Tina laughed as I fished my hoodie out of my backpack. Now that the sun had gone down there was a slight nip in the air.

“Like I’d do that anyway. There’s way too many fish in the sea. I—” She became distracted mid-sentence when the crowd erupted after our team intercepted the Winter Park quarterback.

Jen snorted. “Tina doesn’t have the attention span to steal anybody’s guy. Besides, Luke is so into you,” she said, joining the crowd in performing the wave as it passed our section.

“Hey, I heard that,” Tina, said sticking her tongue out at us. “She’s right though. I know a lost cause when I see it. Luke is off the market,” she added, winking.

Jen and I burst out laughing as Tina swung her arms over our shoulders.

The crowd in the bleachers remained relentless in their support of our team. With all the yelling and high-fiving going on, it was amazing that Jen and Tina and I could hold any kind of conversation at all. I stood up with my arms in the air when the wave passed our section again. As I sat down, something in the trees beyond the football field caught my attention, a movement of some kind. Peering past the bright lights, I held my hand over my eyes to cover the glare to try to make out what I’d seen. I thought it was probably the trees swaying since it was a bit breezy, but my instincts felt differently. It was as if I could see the shadows moving

within the darkness. My heart began beating in a swift tempo that had nothing to do with the game.

“Did you see that? What a catch,” Tina yelled, slapping me on the arm.

I never responded, but neither she nor Jen noticed. They were too caught up in the game with everyone else. Whatever was happening within the shadows was for me alone.

4

LEAH

SETTING THE tray down, I spotted the familiar small white pill next to my plate. I knew why it was there. The stupid paper sun that shouldn't have been worth this much grief. Unfortunately, Mother now knew that I'd been up after lights-out.

She told me the pills were for my own good. They would help me fall asleep while she was at work. That way she would know I was safe. I actually didn't mind taking them sometimes. The pills sent me into a deep slumber that felt like a security blanket. I could dream about anything without fear of Mother finding out.

On other days the pills were a nuisance that robbed me of what little freedom I had. Most nights I stayed awake in the dark for hours after Mother left for work. The lights were

controlled by a switch outside the basement door where I couldn't reach. The darkness to me was a time of peace. In a world where I had no one else to talk to, the shadows became my friends. Like a blind person, I learned to navigate the darkness without sight. I knew every single space of my room by touch alone. Eventually, I would prove my obedience again and the pills would stop, but until then my freedom had once again been limited. "You're not eating," Mother observed, scooping corn up onto her plate. "I thought you liked meat loaf."

I forced my eyes away from the pill and the power it held. "I do," I said, picking up my fork and taking a big bite. It wasn't a lie. Meat loaf was my favorite meal. It was one of the rare occasions when Mother would be generous with portions and I would actually get stuffed. Having a full stomach always made me fantasize that maybe I was getting stronger. It was a silly thought. I wasn't strong. I wanted to be, but my muscles were weak. They'd always been weak. Mother said it was a side effect of my sickness. It could have been worse. I could be bedridden or dead. There was a time I'd wished for death, when my limbs had burned after one of Mother's punishments. Sometimes the vivid memories still haunted me.

"I thought we would watch a little television tonight," Mother said.

Like the little white pill, this was no surprise. Mother's anger may have been unpredictable, but her remorse was always the same. I knew she didn't mean to hurt me. She didn't

want to strike me. She was only trying to protect me. Television was a truce, her way of apologizing. It was a rare treat that I secretly coveted. It was the one time where I did not need an imagination to see the outside world.

When dinner was over and the dishes were clean, Mother watched as I placed the little white pill on my tongue and swallowed. The effects would move through my bloodstream in less than hour. After looking in my mouth to verify that the pill was gone, she was satisfied. “Good job. You may go change for bed while I hook up the TV.”

I hurriedly changed into the fresh set of pajamas that sat at the edge of my bed, not wanting to miss a moment of the magic. It didn’t even matter what we watched. Every single second counted.

I slid onto the couch next to Mother and she put her arm around my shoulders. She had forgiven me. All I had to do was not ruin the moment by wincing from the still-fresh scabs on my back and arms. The wounds that would eventually scar were insignificant. All that mattered was that she was no longer mad.

Normally we watched educational programs, but on rare occasions, like now, she would put on an actual comedy or drama program. I’d read a lot of books over the years that mentioned television, but none of them had captured the essence of watching it live. Clearly, it was something that couldn’t be translated on paper. That or the characters in the stories never appreciated a little TV time as much as I did.

After about twenty minutes, the effects of the pill began to take hold. My brain felt a bit mushy as the show came to an end. Mother switched off the television. Thirty minutes was all I ever was allowed. Not a minute longer. Tonight, I didn't mind. Sleep was already tantalizing me, making promises only I would understand. I was ready to sink into the darkness and let everything else fade away.

Mother helped me into bed and covered me up. I closed my eyes, hearing the sound of her footsteps on the stairs. I was asleep before she could even lock the door. As always, the darkness welcomed me into its warm embrace. Loving and gentle like an old friend.



The next few days came and went without change. Each night at dinner, the little white pill waited on my plate. I began to resent its presence. I welcomed my dreams, but the cost of losing my freedom was making me angry. The emotion was relatively foreign to me. Anger was something I had buried as a useless emotion years ago when I realized that it changed nothing. No matter how angry I got, my parents had never showed up to get me. I could get angry at myself when I did something to make Mother punish me, but it never stopped the leather strap from tearing me apart.

In spite of my reasoning, I still couldn't help feeling angry over the little white pill. It was robbing me of something I desperately wanted. Something that had become an obsession. If Mother found out, her wrath would know no bounds.



I woke up the next morning with a plan. It was dangerous, but worth a try.

“You look happy this morning,” Mother said, placing one slice of bacon on my plate.

“I do?” I looked away, wondering what she saw on my face. She couldn’t know what I was thinking. It would ruin my plan. “I slept well,” I answered lamely.

“That’s good.” She looked pleased at my words and I regretted them almost instantly. The point was to stop taking the pills. If she thought they were helping she would keep them up indefinitely.

After breakfast, Mother gave me my homework assignments for the day and headed upstairs. I stood up and placed my favorite cassette into the tape deck I got as a gift on my eleventh birthday. I liked the music as a distraction from how quiet it could get in my room. I didn’t have much of a selection to choose from and most of the cassettes showed their wear and tear. I was hopeful that Mother would give me more, but it hadn’t happened yet. I learned long ago that Mother became angry if I asked for things like toys, books, or music. Instead she wanted the gratification of providing all my worldly possessions for me. What I liked was never even a consideration.

Humming along to my favorite song, I lifted the couch cushion and reached my hand down into the couch as far as it would go. My fingers fumbled around until they found what I was looking for. “Hello, Daisy,” I whispered after extracting the crude doll I had made years ago out of one of my

socks. The doll looked nothing like my old Daisy. She had no arms or legs and her features were drawn on with marker that had begun to fade years ago. Daisy's eyes were misshapen and her nose was crooked and too big for her face, but it didn't matter. I loved her. She was my friend, the only one who knew all my secrets. Best of all, Daisy never got angry with me, even when I shoved her deep in the cushions of the couch. She always understood.

Before I started my schoolwork, I sat with Daisy on my lap and whispered my plans into her hand-drawn ear. Daisy didn't cast judgment. She knew I would get into a lot of trouble if I was caught, but she also didn't tell me not to do it. That was why she was my best friend. She understood me.

Daisy sat with me while I did my schoolwork and while I finished another book. It was an epic fantasy novel that hooked me instantly.

"I'll clean up as soon as I finish," I told Daisy who smiled back. I forgot about my plan for the evening while I lost myself in a world that was completely different from my own. A world with dragons and sorcerers and one brave girl who held the key to saving the kingdom. The story was layered and intense and I felt a great loss when I turned the last page.

I sat on the couch after I closed the book. "Can you believe that, Daisy?" I asked, reliving the ending in my mind. I was so lost in thought I completely lost track of time until the sound of the lowering dumbwaiter jerked me out of my reverie. Fear sliced through me as I scanned my room. My schoolbooks were still laid out on the couch, Daisy was

smiling beside me, and my book still sat in my hands. I scrambled to my feet and stacked my books quickly, placing them on my desk. I heard the locks above me being disengaged just as I picked up my mess from lunch and rushed it across the room to the trash can. Glancing around the room one last time, I felt confident everything was where it should be. The door opened at the top of the stairs and my heart dropped to my toes when I spotted Daisy on the floor in front of the couch.

Mother was coming. I could hear her footsteps. She would see Daisy and punish me. Racing across the room, I scooped Daisy up and leapt onto the couch, shoving her deep into the cushions just as Mother reached the last step. A thin line of sweat trickled from my neck and down the back of my shirt. My breath was slightly labored, but I forced myself to breathe evenly. I wasn't used to so much exertion.

"Leah?" Mother questioned critically as she rounded the staircase and looked at me.

I didn't need a mirror to know that my face was flushed. My heart raced from the adrenaline pumping through my veins. Mother was sure to suspect I was up to something. "Yes, ma'am," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. My shoulders tensed, knowing how angry she would get if she thought I was hiding something.

"Are you feeling okay? You look peaked."

Peaked? I thought, relieved. That would work. I could do sick. It wouldn't even be a lie. At the moment I felt sick. My stomach was twisted in knots and my skin felt clammy. Even

my head felt fuzzy. Maybe I really was sick. “Not really,” I answered, lying back against the couch cushions. The dizzy feeling abated and the churning in my stomach loosened slightly.

“Damn. The flu is going around at the hospital. I might have brought it home with me. You should get in bed,” she instructed, squirting sanitizer in her hands before placing her wrist on my forehead. “You’re not warm, but you feel clammy. It’s probably the flu. Bed,” she instructed.

I nodded, sagging with relief. As I stood up the room spun slightly and I almost believed that I was really sick.

Mother clucked over me as I climbed into bed. “My poor girl,” she said, smoothing a hand over my hair. I sighed with pleasure. “I’m going to go make you some soup.”

“Thank you.” I made my voice sound pitiful, almost fooling myself. Her footsteps faded as she climbed the steps. The locks were engaged and I could hear the dumbwaiter rising. Only when I heard her rustling around in the kitchen above did my heartbeat return to its normal rhythm. That was a close call that had the potential of going so much differently. My mistake today could never be repeated. What if Mother would have suspected something more? What if she had decided to search my room? I worked hard to cover all traces of what I’d been up to, but she could figure it out. I could not be so stupid again.

Mother returned shortly with a bowl of chicken noodle soup. I obediently opened my mouth as she spooned the hot soup into my mouth. I could have fed myself, but I knew it

brought her pleasure to take care of me. Considering the close call I'd narrowly escaped, I accepted the soup without complaint.

"I knew I should have brought home a flu shot for you," Mother commented, catching a drop of the soup with the spoon.

"That's okay," I answered. "It's not too bad."

"You should stay in bed and rest tonight and tomorrow," she instructed, giving me a sip of juice.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good girl. I'll check on you in the morning."

"Thank you, Mother," I said, closing my eyes, hoping maybe she had forgotten about the little white pill. Chances were I was setting myself up for disappointment.

I felt the bed dip as she stood up and I forced myself to breathe evenly. She probably just left the pill upstairs and planned to return with it. I wasn't in the clear yet. Her steps paused on the stairs. She could have been listening, waiting to catch me faking. I had no way of knowing for sure. The lock on the door upstairs disengaged and the lights went out to the sound of the door being closed and locked. My eyelids flew open. Either she really had forgotten or she thought my sickness would make me sleep without the assistance of the pill. I decided to do things differently. I needed to make myself stronger. Continuing to be weak would only hurt me in the long run. My other plans would have to be pushed to the side.

The darkness held me in its embrace while I waited for

the sound of Mother leaving for work. The wait would be longer since I'd gone to bed earlier than usual. I was patient though. Without the effects of the pills, I could wait all night if that's what it took. Tonight I would start the process of becoming someone else.