

WINNING STORY

Phoebe by [Maya Rose](#)

<http://figment.com/books/187161-Phoebe>

The passenger window of the car is cold as I press my right hand against it. Mist pools around it, leaving a clear imprint of my palm on the window when I pull it away. Then the condensation begins to fade, the bottom disappearing first and my fist contracts. The right side is vanishing faster than the left. I bite down the urge to wipe it all away with one smooth, final motion. To make it the same. To make it match. To make it even.

The glass resonates in my hand. I wipe my fingers against my palm, trying to kill the memory of the cold in it, but it only makes it worse. I raise my left hand and subtly place it on the window. The feeling is still uneven. I cringe.

I snatch my hands away from the window and rub them on my pants, trying to rid them of the feeling of the glass. It doesn't go away. I rub harder. At the same speed. At the same time. To make it even. My fingers find a discontinuity in the fabric of my jeans and I look down at it. There's a brown dot of something on it. My fingers squeal in disgust. They're dirty. I hold them hovering in the air in front of me. Don't touch my face, don't touch anything.

My breathing quickens and heat drops into my stomach. I take deep breaths, hoping to calm the anxiety and rage roaring in my ears. I fill my lungs desperately, trying to separate my thoughts into rationality, trying to bring myself back from the edge.

I place one of my fingernails next to the spot and press it into it. It comes off on my evenly bitten nail, leaving a two-dimensional point of a dirty brown where it had been. A stain. My thin shield of calm cracks. I need to wash them. Now. Let me out of the car. And the chocolate or dirt or mud or vomit or whatever is underneath my fingernail now. I can feel it pressing against the tender skin of the tip of my finger and a shudder passes through me. I remove it with the back of my other fingernail and wipe it on the seam of the car seat. I flick it away.

The back of my throat burns. I want to cry. I clench my teeth as I feel the pressure at the back of my eyes. I still feel the point of pressure under my fingernail and on the back of the other one. I dig at the skin of my fingertip with my fingernail, trying to rid it of whatever particle still remains. It doesn't work. I scrape and tear at the skin, trying desperately to make it go away. I can feel the tears coming to the back of my eyes. I close my eyes to fight them back. The driver doesn't notice. Good.

The telephone poles appear along the edge of the road. One, two, three, four. *Stop*. Six, seven, eight. *Now*. I tear my eyes away from them. I wring my hands together, fighting to keep my eyes in my lap. I'm missing telephone poles. It doesn't matter. Yes it does. Don't look. I have to.

My head snaps up and the count continues, trying to compensate for those that I missed. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. Anxiety pulses in my palms, the heartbeat running through the veins. I know the count isn't right. But I can't just start over, that wouldn't be right either. They have to go away. I have to start again at the next strip of them. Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. I don't care how many there are. All I care about is whether it's *right*. It can't be right if I don't count them. If I don't start at the beginning and continue until the end. Why did I look away? Twenty five, twenty six, twenty seven. *Stop*.

I tap my fingernails on my desk at school. One, two. One, two, three. One, two. One, two, three. Pointer, middle. Pointer, middle, ring. Both hands at the same time. To make it even. A strange kind of calm settles over me as I tap my soul into the rhythm. It's counted – controlled.

The teacher isn't in the room. I sit in the middle row, far to the side. No one sits next to me.

One, two. One, two. One, two, three.

It's 7:40 now. School starts at seven forty five. S-e-v-e-n f-o-r-t-y. My brain spells the words. Repetitively. Until the letters stab at my brain. They're almost painful.

S-e-v-e-n f-o-r-t-y.

“Hey,”

I hadn't noticed the girl appear beside me. Her face is soft, with round cheeks and an angular jaw. Her mouth is crooked as she smiles faintly at me, the right side of it rising farther than the left. Her left eye tilts slightly downward at the edge. She's very pretty, but the small inequalities make me cringe. I don't want to hate them. Breathe.

“Hey,” I respond. My voice sounds strained. I can't help it. My mind keeps spelling. S-e-v-e-n f-o-r-t-y.

“You mind if I sit here?” She gestures to the seat next to me. The room is barren and empty. The blue, nodular chairs bore into my eyes. Open. Why would she want to sit here?

“Sure,” the words tumble across my lips before I can stop them.

She sits at the desk next to me, running her hands under light brown curls of hair and draping them over the plastic frame of her seat.

My thumb is drawn to the base of my middle finger, running obsessively over the ring that resides there. Checking whether it's fallen off. My thumbnail clicks over it.

“Hi,” the girl says, turning halfway to look at me and clearly asking for conversation. The harsh fluorescent lights reflect in white-blue squares off her black-rimmed, square glasses, hiding her eyes from view. This image is cleaner, more refined. It's easier to look at her now.

I wave the fingers of my right hand at her, forcing a smile through the anxiety. My right fingers feel special now. I flex the fingers of my left hand to compensate, hoping she doesn't notice. She does. She turns to face me completely and the squares of light leave her glasses, revealing her eyes again. I see them dart down to my left hand.

“What's your name?” She says, her eyes back on mine and the smile relaxed back onto her face. She emanates calm. The serenity hovers in a glowing aura around her. Its tendrils barely reach me.

“Annabelle.” I say quietly. “Anna,” I like this version better. It’s symmetrical. I write it on my papers with a lowercase a, anna. It matches on both sides. “What’s yours?”

“Phoebe,” she says. It rhymes. Fee-bee. I smile a little. P-h-o-e-b-e. P-h-o-e-b-e. *Stop.*

“What?” Phoebe says, cocking her head to the side and looking at me, her face downcast in polite questioning and apology.

“What?” I retort quickly. I don’t know what she’s talking about.

“Oh, I thought you said something.”

My face freezes and I lock my lips together as I hear the letters under my breath. P-h-o-e-b-e. *Stop.*

“Um...” No feasible response presents itself. “Nothing.”

She lets the conversation drop.

My respect for her rises.

. . .

Phoebe’s chair squeaks on the floor as she crashes into it next to me. This has been her seat for a week now.

“Hi,” she says tiredly. She runs her fingers under her hair, letting it flow delicately over her shoulders.

“Hi.” I smile at her. Her lopsided features don’t bother me anymore. I’ve grown used to them. The concept of friendship has never truly resonated with me, but she’s nice enough. I don’t resent her company as I do so many others’. My hands are knotted in my lap. I’ve been wringing them together, wondering whether I closed the garage door as I left through it this morning. I ritually press the button at the door from the house into the garage and dash out under the door before it closes. There’s a code on the outside of the garage that opens the door and my parents leave the door to the house unlocked so I can get in. But if I didn’t close the garage, anyone could get in.

I *always* do.

What if I didn’t?

I’ve thoroughly wracked my memory. An acid pulse throbs in my throat. Anxiety heats my face. The time is too close. I can’t return to check.

“What’s the matter?” She asks. She looks careworn, sagging under her own weight, but she’s made a habit of putting my problems before her own.

“Nothing,” I separate my writhing hands and set them on my legs.

“Tell me,” she says. She’s built a kind of tentative trust with me, where she trusts me completely and I occasionally tell her what I’m thinking. I decide to tell her. She can’t do any harm.

“I don’t know whether I closed the garage door.” I say quietly in what I hope is a dismissive tone.

“Do you usually close it?” She asks, turning to face me completely, showing me her crooked eyes. Her face bears just the slightest bit of concern. It’s perfect, telling me my worries are ridiculous, but that she understands anyway.

“Yes,” I know that. That doesn’t mean I *did*.

“Then you’d have closed it today.” Phoebe’s face remains comfortably settled in the compassionate questioning.

“But I don’t *remember* closing it today...” I say, my hands flying back together without any thought on my part and tying themselves in knots again.

And then both my hands are encased in two colder ones. They’re small and slight with long fingernails. Her eyes are locked unflinchingly in mine. My eyes shoot downward. I can’t look at her. My face flames with embarrassment and my heart throbs with worry.

“It’s okay.” Phoebe croons. Her voice is so calm, so sure that for a moment, I almost believe her. It’s as though she already knows what’s going through my mind now. Her field of calm touches me in the closeness. My heart relaxes. My blood cools. I let her hold my hands.

. . .

I keep my hands in my lap as I sit in the cafeteria. Don’t touch the table.

The black-rimmed glasses appear next to me without warning, a shout of distinction on the girl’s face. The plastic seat’s feet squeal across the floor as she sits.

My eyes meet hers for a moment, and I return her smile. I feel the contrast in my cheeks. My smile is sad and nervous, hers is calm and certain. Mine searches for reassurance, hers gives it.

Phoebe’s left hand is flat on the table. I look at and twitch backward. As always, she fails to let it slide.

“What’s the problem?” She asks, but the words aren’t rude, they’re caring and empathetic. But I can tell she already knows. She doesn’t move her hand.

I’ve given up on telling her nothing. She always argues and always wins.

“Your hand is...on the table...” I tell her. I know she won’t be offended. She’s beginning to understand.

“Honey, it’s okay.” She says, leaving her hand there. “There’s nothing wrong with the table. They clean them.”

There’s a certain determination to her tone that makes her words a little less believable. It’s automatic, like she’s telling herself as much as me.

“They’re still dirty. Other people sit here before we do.”

“And other people touch their hands to the table. They’re fine. I’m fine.”

There’s that tone again. *I’m fine*. So hard and unforgiving. She’s making the words true.

“Give me your hand.”

I stare at her blankly, I know what she wants. I’ve learned to trust her hands, there are very few people that I allow to touch mine. But I can’t let her do this. I can’t let her control me.

Resilience stops my hands in my lap. Anger creeps into the edge of my consciousness.

“Come on,” Phoebe extends her hand. *No*. I can’t let her win. “Damn it, Anna.” She says quietly, smiling and laughing a little. “Give me your hand.” The humor gives me a choice and the bare thought of anger is washed away. My small laughter distracts me just enough. I will myself to extend a shaking hand.

She holds it in both of hers and pulls it out of its tight fist. My hand rests open between hers. She looks me squarely in the eye, and slams my palm down onto the table.

My brain feels the bacteria and dirt crawling onto my palm, embedding themselves in my skin. My hand burns to retract and scrub itself on my pant leg while I walk to the bathroom to wash them. But I keep my eyes fixed in Phoebe’s. My jaw locks and I grind my teeth together as I feel the contagion seeping in through my skin.

My hand twitches. She presses down on it harder. I can’t stand it anymore. I try to pull my hand away. She keeps hers firmly on top of mine.

“Let go.” I tell her.

“It’s okay.” She says softly. “I know it hurts.”

“You don’t know.” I say, my voice more bitter than I had intended.

“Yes I do.” Phoebe’s voice is so strong, yet so gentle. I want to believe her. I want someone to understand. But she doesn’t. She couldn’t.

“Let go.” I give her one more chance. The flutter of anger returns. She doesn’t know. Couldn’t.

I rip my hand away and hurry from the table.

I haven’t gone ten steps before she’s beside me again. Not upset, not angry.

She follows me to the bathroom. Lets me wash my hands.

She knows how to deal with me.

“Hey.” It’s the same voice as it always is as I enter her room. She lives down the block from me. Her invitation was spontaneous. It’s Saturday and the call came on the home phone number she got out of the school directory.

Phoebe has decided to be my friend. I have begun to agree with her. She has sat next to me for the month since I met her. She has forced me into conversation at lunch. I resented it at first, but now it’s almost enjoyable.

She’s sitting on her bed. I collapse onto it next to her, my posture hunched and improper.

“Hi,” I say quietly, pushing my long sleeves up my arms. And we just sit in silence for a while. And it’s not awkward. It’s not strange. It suits me fine.

My eyes fall to her hands on her thighs. Tapping. Both at the same time, a wave from pinky to pointer. All even. *Taptaptaptaptap*.

Recognition scratches at my mind. My eyes dart up to her face for a second and she notices. She stops abruptly, flattening her hands. And that’s where we sit, for a moment, staring straight ahead.

My mind sticks on her hand. I know.

Reflex takes my thumb to the place where my ring should be. It runs over the spot, and meets only the lined crevice of flesh. There’s no ring there. I look down at my hand. It’s not there.

Tears spring to the back of my eyes. A lump rises in the back of my throat, stinging my palette. My mind whirls and my heart pounds. I took a shower. It’s on my bathroom counter. I hope.

Scenes race behind my eyes – of the house burning and losing it to the flames, of a man in black stealing it. *Ridiculous*, I tell myself. But it could happen. My thumb races over the base of my middle finger.

“What’s wrong?”

Phoebe’s looking at me hard, not in concern, but not dismissively either.

“My ring.” I groan.

I don’t have to say any more. She knows.

“It’s okay,” she begins, as she always does.

“No, it’s not.” I say, rising from her bed. My house is just down the block. “I’ll be right back.” I tell her, and walk briskly to her door.

“Yes it is.” She’s in front of me before I can react, blocking the door. My thumb cries out, longing for the ring to be there.

“Phoebe,” My voice is stuck in a monotone. “Just let me go, okay?”

“No.” Her gaze is hard and unrelenting.

“You...you don’t understand.”

“I do understand, Anna.”

“Let me go.”

“No.”

I glare at her now, my jaw locked in a slight under bite. Anger roars in my ears, twisting in with the anxiety, forming a hard knot in my stomach. How could she pretend to know?

“I know what you’re thinking, Anna. I promise.”

“No you *don’t!*” My voice rises.

“Yes I do.” Her voice is only verging on harsh. She hasn’t lost it with me yet. I’m not trying to make it easy for her.

I pause a long time before I respond. “How could you?”

There’s another long silence as she wrestles with the words in her mind.

“Because that was me a year ago.”

My mind flails, trying to make sense of the words.

“What?” I squint my eyes at her.

“But I beat it, Anna.” Phoebe’s voice is begging me to understand. And I do. But I don’t want to. “It’s called Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.”

And the name breaks it all, a knife in the glass wall I’ve put up between myself and reality. The name I know, but haven’t accepted. My tense muscles melt. I turn away from the door and cross the room, slamming my back against the wall. My resilience is shattered and I let her stand next to me, my hands trapped in hers. Her lopsided eyes boring into mine. She smiles, almost laughs when she speaks, making the words light and acceptable.

“Just don’t listen to it.”

And when I return home, much later, I find it right where I knew I left it.

RUNNER UP

Whispers by [Nadege K. Richards](#)

<http://figment.com/books/164287-Whispers>

I am no hero. I don't have tights, or a cape, or a mask to hide my identity from others. I am who I am, and I strongly believe being you is far more powerful than anything this life has to offer. Life is too short, love is too important, and knowledge is so scarce to be anyone else.

“Are you sure about this, Em?” Jace throws me a look of caution as I pull my hair into a tight ponytail. He stares back at me in the mirror, body tense and unsure. Little does he know my decision was confirmed and final weeks ago.

I don't know why or when I made the decision, but finding myself on the brink of conditional victory, I knew I had subliminally agreed on the impossible. I'd spent years searching for a purpose in my life. I'd seen everything there was to this world, and yet, I felt the need to experience more. It wasn't enough for me. It was sometime between saving his life and maybe even my own, that I realized it doesn't have to be more, it just has to suffice. And when I look into the hazel irises of my only dream of perfection, I know for a fact it will be enough for me. No, I wouldn't change this for anything.

“I'm sure.” I turn to face him and flash him an easy smile. I can tell he has trouble believing me, so I take his hand in mine and say, “I want to do this, Jace. I want to prove them wrong and show that we're stronger than they think.” I turn back and face the mirror. Though I look confident on the outside, I couldn't be more terrified on the in. Months ago the only thing I could think about was what shoes were out that season and what color I was going to paint my nails the next day. Now, as I stand in the bathroom behind locked doors, preparing to do something beyond comprehension, those things are the last thing on my mind.

I reach into the drawer beneath the basin and pull out the scissors. I grip them tightly, squeezing the rubber around the handles as if they are causing me pain. Jace's hands are on my shoulders, eyes on me in the mirror, giving me every ounce of support he is capable of.

Jace gives my hand a firm squeeze, bringing another smile to my lips. “Whatever you do from here on out, just know that I'll be with you every step of the way. Even though you can be a little delusional sometimes.” He kisses my temple and takes a step back from me.

The smile brightens on my lips as his words echo through my soul. Jace, his smile, his presence, the fact that he is still mine and doing well, is enough for me. One look at myself in the mirror as I snip my ponytail and the hair falls to the floor, and I know from today I won't be the same Emma anymore.

It took me a while to realize, but our everyday decisions compromise our future, whether we think we have one or not. Everyday that future is altering, but it is only by our actions do we determine the outcome of said future. Carelessness will only leave us in the past. I've noticed a change in me, a change that has no doubt made my future brighter. No matter what life has in store for me, no matter how I get there, I know my journey will be worthwhile.

Springford High is a small public school right off the coast from Lake City beach. Sand tingles my toes as I hop out my truck in my flip flops and make my way up the sidewalk. I'm aware of the dirty looks I've already begun to receive. I'm also aware of the strong urge I have to say something, but I

decide against it and continue on until I meet Jace at the front doors. He immediately takes me in for a hug and a warm kiss on my lips.

“Everyone’s staring at us,” I whisper to him once I’ve broken the embrace. “Or maybe it’s just me they’re staring at.”

He shrugs his shoulders then takes my hand to lead me inside. “Let them stare. You’re beautiful.”

We enter the building and just like I suspected, all eyes are focused on me. Growing a bit self-conscious, I stand as close as I can to Jace’s side and try to make myself invisible. I know it doesn’t work when people begin to snicker and point.

As we turn the corner and I glance back at the gawking eyes, my shoulder bumps into someone and books tumble onto the floor. It takes me some time to realize that they are mine.

“Watch we’re your going, *klutz!*” the person yells, but I don’t look up. Jace scurries to pick up the books and places them back inside my messenger bag.

“Sorry,” I mutter. I tug my beanie further down on my head and turn to continue walking. But before I can put my right ahead of my left, I hear a gasp and someone catches my shoulder to spin me back around.

“Emma? What the heck happened to you?” She yells loud enough to grab the attention of other students. They crowd around us and stare, causing me to feel like a pariah.

I look up from my feet and glance at Grace, the girl I used to call my partner in crime. Her boyfriend Michael is standing beside her with his arm around her shoulders, and I feel Jace tense at the sight of him. “Nothing happened to me.”

She gives me a dumbfounded look as if she doesn’t understand a word I’ve said. Clearly, she doesn’t like the new me.

“Tell me you did not do what I think you did.” She reaches up and pulls the beanie off my head before I can stop her. A loud murmur of voices erupts throughout the mass. “Your hair, Emma! Why? This is a joke, right?” She looks at Jace with pure resentment creasing her forehead.

“It’s not a joke, Grace. And my hair isn’t the most important thing in the world. I’m not ashamed.” I glance back at Jace, his head shaven and hairless like mine now is. If we had the choice to have it any other way, we’d take it. Though, the cancer growing around Jace’s heart won’t spare us any more than two months. Being here—being together—was a risk we had already agreed to take.

“If you’re planning to redeem yourself with this whole charade, it won’t work. We don’t accept ‘impurities,’” Grace mocks.

Jace grabs my hand and starts to pull me in the other direction, but instead of defusing the heat of the moment, he makes things worse. “Leaving so soon, pretty boy?” Michael calls. “I was hoping you’d show us one of your doodles.”

I turn to face Jace, but I don’t have to look at him to know he’s already ticked off. Jace is an artist, and he’s had a passion for drawing since he was five. He has dreams of starting his very own comic books, but not everyone has a mind like me. Sadly, Michael has been picking on him for the past

three years, never letting it go for a minute. Every time I try to say something, Jace tells me stay out of it.

“Shut up, Michael,” Jace sneers.

Michael doesn't take it lightly and releases Grace to go after him. Before I can blink, he has his hands around Jace's throat, gripping him up like a rag doll. “You want to say something else, *spaz*?” he spits.

Without thinking, I push myself between him and Jace, somewhat successful at tearing them apart. Jace fights back, but I know in his condition it's not good to get so worked up. “Let him go!” I yell. “Stop!”

Michael looks at me and then to the students crowding around us. Figuring Jace isn't worth the suspension, he lowers his fist.

Grace reclaims her spot next to Michael as if this is the norm. “Look at you. You were wrong to leave me, Emma. Things will only get worse for you.”

“You know,” I begin, “I am so sick of your attitude, Grace. You have no idea what's going on. Before you take another stab at me, try walking a mile in my shoes first.”

“Oh please,” Grace retorts. “Do you honestly think I have time for you, of all people? You're a nobody, a piece of scum on the bottom of my heels. You're not even worth the time right now.”

Before I can blow up or say something I'd regret, Jace is pulling me towards the classroom doors again. “Em, this is not your fight. Please, just let it go.” The desperation in his voice makes me stop to look back at him. I've never seen his eyes so despaired.

“Yes it is. I'm as much of a victim as you are. Jace, I'm not doing this anymore.” I turn away from him and face the crowd of students. It's not like I have a speech prepared, but I know I want—no, *need*—to say something. Anything.

I inhale deeply and allow my emotions to carry my voice. “Five months ago, Grace and a couple of my other friends thought it would be funny to spread a rumor that I hooked up with the entire football team. It was funny at first, but then when people kept asking me if I had an STD, it wasn't anymore.” People begin to whisper silently to themselves, snickering and pointing, but I swallow the lump in my throat and press on. “People call me dirty names when I've done nothing wrong. No one even wants to look at me anymore because I'm *disgusting*. I had to explain things that I couldn't even understand to my parents! And it's just not funny, how you can all stand there and laugh because it's not you. What's disgusting is that you all look at yourself in the mirror and consider yourself a good person.”

Tears come to my eyes, but I don't let them fall. I want to show them how strong I really can be. But the anger I'd felt when it had first happened was burning deep within me now, on the brink of exploding.

“I didn't know,” whispers a girl from behind me. I notice her as Leesa, a girl I sit next to in Chemistry. Her blue eyes are full of remorse.

I nod. “No one ever knows. And if it's not me, it's someone else.” I look at Grace and see the agitation of the moment settling upon her. “Jace has cancer. He found out three months ago, but they caught it

too late. He's dying. Bullying him, mocking and laughing at me, doesn't make it any better or make the problem go away. All I am trying to say is, if it doesn't sound like a good thing to say, it probably isn't. Words hurt, words kill. You never know how lethal your words can be. Think twice before you say something."

It's silent for a while, everyone staring at me with confused eyes. None of them are brave enough to speak up, for fear of being Grace's next target. But I can tell by the look on their faces that what I've said means something to them.

"This is ridiculous," Grace says. "It was just a joke, get over it already! And how was I supposed to know he has cancer?"

"That's why you don't say anything, Grace, because you don't know. It's best to keep your mouth shut." I walk over to her and grab the beanie from her hands, ignoring Michael. Her mouth hangs agape, cheeks burning red. "But just know that I forgive you. Believe it or not, I once trusted you with my life. Just...don't lose yourself, okay?"

I turn my back to her and meet Jace at the end of the hall. People begin to clear out as teachers emerge from classrooms, and Grace storms away with Michael hot on her trail. But I know I've changed something today, nonetheless. At least I can say I tried.

Instead of going to class, Jace and I decide to skip. It's not something we do on a normal basis, but today is an exception. We need time alone.

We take his car and head south. I'm quiet most of the way until he reaches over and puts his hand over mine. He glances sideways at me and says, "Thank you."

I give him a small smile and bring his knuckles to my lips. "No. Thank *you*." We ride the rest of the way in silence, allowing our unspoken words to fill the car. But it is enough to know he is on my side, every step of the way like he'd promised. I'm blessed to have someone like him love someone like me.

We arrive at the beach sometime around noon and the shore is quiet and peaceful. We kick off our shoes and race towards the waves, feeling alive for the first time in a long time. I dip my feet into the water, only to retreat with gooseflesh.

"What's the matter? Scared of a little cold water?" Jace says, his eyes telling a story of their own.

"Don't you dare." But it's already too late. He picks me up and with much ease, throws me right into the waves. Wet, soaked, and dripping in salt water, I race after him, laughing in a way I haven't since before his diagnosis. I catch him somewhere down the shore and by the time we're done fooling around, our clothes are plastered to our bodies. Still laughing giddily, we decide to sit at the edge of the shore, rest in the midst of the tranquil everglades, and enjoy the beginning of a beautiful sunset.

"Jace?" I whisper after minutes of silence.

He's lost somewhere in the setting sun, but still manages to mumble something that sounds like "yes".

"How long do you think this happiness will last?" I ask. He doesn't say anything, but I know he's been thinking the same thing.

He rolls over on his side and props his head up on his elbow. He gazes down at me with sad eyes. “Do we really have to talk about this?”

I stare up at the sky. “No. I guess not.”

I’ve known for a while that forever with us will only be months. In a couple of weeks Jace will be in the hospital fighting for his life. He’ll be dying and there’ll be nothing I can do but sit back and watch. It doesn’t help that he never wants to talk about it either, and it hurts me to think I’ll have to go on without him. Moments like this I wish I can help him.

“Why did you do it?” Jace whispers, running his fingers over my beanie with a soft smile on his face.

I know exactly what he means by ‘it’. “I guess...I guess I was just getting tired of it. We deserve better, everyone does. And we all deserve to be treated like we’re worthy to live. I think this world is too small for anyone to go forgotten and for me to not say anything would be like watching someone drown.” His eyes watch me closely, but he doesn’t say a word. “I just can’t bear to stand by and watch this generation deteriorate. I felt like the walls were suddenly caving in and it was my duty to set them right again—my job, my calling. You know what I mean?”

His smile never wavers when he answers, “I know *exactly* what you mean. Has anyone ever told you that you’re one wise girl?”

“No. But there’s always a first,” I say, nudging his shoulder with mine.

We’re silent again as the sun sets just beyond the horizon. Our fingers lock as we watch the seagulls fly, wishing we were among them, so careless and free. But I have everything I’ve ever wanted right here. No sickness, no death, will ever take this away from me.

Jace suddenly turns to me with tears in his eyes. “I don’t care if I die tomorrow. I don’t care if I die in the next three minutes. I just know from the day I met you, Emma, my life has been brighter, chemotherapy has been more bearable, and I have strength to get through another day.” He takes me in his arms and I don’t deny or retreat. I cry because it is all I can do.

He leans in and kisses my lips, our breath mingling in the warm sea breeze around us. “You’re going to change this world someday,” he whispers into my ear, as if it is our little secret. “And you’re going to make me so proud.”

For a while, we enjoy what’s left of the day, hold each other closely as if it hurts to let go, and promise to spend every waking hour together if that’s what it takes. Just for a little while, I forget tomorrow and live for today.

No, I think to myself. I wouldn't change this for anything.

RUNNER UP

Living by [Kat Connolly](#)

<http://figment.com/books/178825-Living>

Ring around the rosy

I could hear it.

It was always reciting itself in my head. That nursery rhyme always leads up to the footsteps, and the bugs, it's always an introduction to my fears hiding away in my head.

Luka laughs at me. He wraps his fingers carefully around my bony wrists, and his chapped lips near my own. They caress my cheekbones, till finding my lips in the dark. His body urges itself onto mine, and the brick wall squeezes against my spine.

I hear them out there, screaming and stomping. Shrilling voices.

Though, the night sky is the only thing that blankets Luka and me. His pupils are so large, I can only see a hint of his wild green eyes behind the black, and his lips press together.

“Madeline.” He says, reaching in to take another kiss, “it’s just you and me, babe.” His breath was hot against my face, contrary to the chill of the crisp air.

I trusted him. He did the needle for me a lot of times, because my fingers always shook. He even let me practice on him.

He was good at ignoring the footsteps and the bugs. He was good at focusing on me. I owed that to him.

He pushed my chin up, and my lips met his. My heart thudded along my chest, and his met the same quick pace.

I like to think it was for the passion that my heart skidded along my insides.

Sometimes I knew I was wrong.

Pockets full of posy

The blankets cover me loosely, and the sweat courses itself all over my body. I can't remember how I got here, back to my bed, but I can tell where I am without opening my eyes. I can smell the soft vanilla and breathe the thick air. I ease my eyes open, adjusting to the white walls, and rolling down to watch my arm flop over across the comforter, and my hand to dangle over the stained carpet.

I can see the traces of my veins sunken beneath the skin. The mass of purple and black that refuses to leave. Reaching over, I circle my finger around the mass, leaning closer; I refuse to pinpoint the marking.

“They’re coming,” I breathe, and snap my head forward to an empty house.

I'm just certain that the door will bust open soon, they're coming.

They are going to take everything I have away.

Everything of my mother's.

Sometimes I blame the bugs that crawl my skin. They are the ones to cause this.

Sometimes I imagine Luka, lined in blood. Sitting up quickly, I can't help but run my fingers along each other, their tips soon tapping along my skin, and then finding their way to the wooden head of the bed. Pushing myself up, I restrict my hands to my side. My teeth dig my lips.

I don't want to make a peep. For the bugs may be here.

Ashes, Ashes

I can hear Luka's engine running in the driveway. I know it's him because the smell of smoke is already circulating towards the living room. I know my mother is not home, simply because she would've pestered me already about her missing gold necklace.

I'd tell her I had no idea.

Luka doesn't knock. He only ever knocks when my mother is home. He smiles when he sees me, his tight lips pulling against his skin, crinkling around the surrounding bones like paper.

Though, as much as I'd like to think he's smiling to see me, I know he just got another load of speed. He pushes me forward towards the flannel couch, and I don't argue, my body moving as if it's a puppet. He scrambles towards his pockets, both of his hands are shaking, and I notice a small bob in his head.

"Mads, this is quality meth." He said, "one of the best dealers around here, got it for cheap. You know, relations and that."

I nodded, I didn't really know, but I wanted him to prick me with the needle quickly. I was getting the anxious feeling that I got after too long. Where I could worry about things, and let the guilt crease my brain about my mother's gold necklace, and the fact that what if she walked in, right now, and seeing the look on her face.

His fingers ran along my bony arm, and he pushed his fingers beneath my wrist, and instinctively, I raised my arm for him to shoot me up.

He wrapped the rubber band around my skin, and snapped it tightly. I cringed, and he didn't react, intent on the needle as his fingers still tried to balance out.

The needle nearly hit, but his fingers jolted, and the blood soon came as a reaction. Luka cursed under his breath for a moment before angling his head back to the needle. I probably shouldn't have expected an apology.

"Luka, how do you get used to it?" I interrupted before he could attempt again.

He arched an eyebrow, as if my question was nonsense.

“The voices, can’t you hear them?” I asked before I could bite it back, a smirk rose on his face, and his hand tangled in his shaggy, sandy hair. His faded eyes looked around the room, as if suddenly each decoration my mother had hung on the wall, including the awful ceramic chickens, were suddenly the most fascinating things, rather than my question.

I wanted the high more than this silence. But his smile only grew, his eyes tracing back to mine.

“I can hear them, I hear everything. When you finally decide that they’re real and really there, it’s just a background noise. Now stop fighting it and let’s have some fun, eh?” A hoarse laugh followed, and I nodded.

He pricked the needle against my veins and was careful not to miss this time.

We all fall down.

“Mads-“ I could hear him beg, patting his hand against my face.

“Madeline, open your damn eyes. Look at me.” He snapped, shaking my shoulders.

But I didn’t answer. I couldn’t find my voice, and my throat was clogged with a disgusting flavor and what felt like a rotting stomach.

I managed to open my eyes; I could hear his voice rise, complimenting the sweet, puppy, brown. Relieved, I could only imagine.

But it all kind of merged together.

Soon, as everything fell black, and the taste burned my tongue.

“Madeline, I’m sorry, so sorry.”

“I still hear the nursery rhyme sometimes. It still scares me, a lot.” I spluttered, bushing back my splintered hair. I’ve been trying to fix it up, but it’s taking a lot of love and care. All of them watched me silently, the rows of blue chairs were now full of wide-eyed students.

Some, especially the little black haired girl up front, eyes were bulging. At first, that made me stutter. Seeing their faces like that, but by now, I figured it was a reaction.

“I never had a horrible life, I mean my parents were divorced, but really I did it just so to get rid of my constant fears. But after a while, I realized being scared was okay. Really, in the end it caused more panic than what I had before.”

I tapped the microphone with my nails, and tried to avoid meeting their bright eyes.

I missed my bright eyes.

“I think that rehab, was well, a really good choice. I heard a lot of horror stories. They made mine like fairytales. “I paused, clenching my fingers tightly. “If anything, I just want you all to know that it messes you up in a long run. I hate even thinking about my past, and to be honest, it’s not that hard to forget about it. A lot of it is actually just a big blank spot in my head.”

I looked down at my feet, licking my dry lips.

“There’s actually about a month that I can only vaguely remember. “

I shot my eyes up to see them whispering amongst themselves, hands cupped to each other’s ears. I used to want to know what they were saying, but after a while, I’ve come to realize I probably don’t want to know.

“So, really, before you decide to try it because you think it fixes everything, look at what you like about yourself. Look at the fact that you can feel safe in your own body, and you will get your chills from scary movies and not the bugs crawling up your arms. Just watch what you are putting in your body. “

With a pause,

“I don’t want any of you ending up looking like me, feeling like I did, and getting left in the dark. It’s a miracle I didn’t die. It’s a miracle I got another chance to live.”

I found my final note,

“I didn’t start living until I died.”

Ring around the rosie

Pockets full of posy

Ashes, ashes

We all fall down.

RUNNER UP

Forever with Two R's by [Xena Pulliam](#)

<http://figment.com/books/221535-Forever-With-Two-R-s>

Morgan was perched on the window seat in the hotel room that she had booked for the day. It wasn't a very comfortable window seat, but then again, neither was the big white dress she was wearing. That was okay though because wedding dresses aren't supposed to be comfortable, just beautiful. Morgan gazed out the window overlooking the park across the street and thought about how lucky she was to be marrying Justin, the one guy who everyone else wanted, but only Morgan got.

Justin was a handsome guy; there was no doubt about it. With the baby blue eyes, sandy hair, and the body of a model; Morgan knew that he would be a vision in his tux when she walked down the aisle. It was more than that though, Justin just understood her in a way that no one else ever did. He was there holding her hand when her mom was battling cancer, they graduated high school together, and even though they separated when they went off to college, they always found their way back to one another. Morgan smiled softly to herself as the memory of the day he proposed resurfaced bit by bit.

It was a warm summer day and they were at the beach once again. It would seem that Morgan and Justin always ended up on the beach for those really important moments in their lives. They met on the beach, became best friends on the beach, first kissed on the beach, and first confessed their love for one another on the beach.

Seagulls squawked and flew low, almost brushing the top of Justin's tall 6'2" frame, and Morgan laughed at the appalled look on his face when one of them managed to poop on his shoulder. The look on his face quickly changed to mischievous as he scooped her up, and dragged her into the water with him to wash it off. The day was perfect, better than most, and Morgan didn't think she could be any happier than she was in that moment.

As she lay in the sun soaking up some of the remaining rays in the day, Justin called out her name and she startled out of a daze in a panic. Justin was smiling though as he pulled her to her feet and led her over to his drawing in the sand and Morgan's trepidation quickly faded.

When she saw what he had done for her Morgan grew teary eyed at the sweetness and perfection of the gesture, until she realized that he had made a mistake and she started to giggle.

"Justin, you spelled forever wrong," she managed to get out.

One look at the seriousness in Justin's face, and Morgan's giggles disappeared and she began to hold her breath, waiting for his reaction. Justin was biting back a smile as he said, "No I didn't, it says 'Marry Me & Be Mine Forevrr,' for a reason."

"And why is that?" Morgan asked in relief.

"Well I spelled forever with two r's because forever shouldn't end. I want to be with you always. You, and no one else for the rest of my life, and even when I die I still want you to be mine. That's why I spelled forever with two r's..."

Back in her hotel room, Morgan wiped a tear away at the memory and made her final decision. She threw open the door and ran down the hallway to where Justin was getting ready for their big day. She had to see him just one more time before she went through with it and when she cracked open the door and peeked in, she knew she was making the right decision.

Morgan returned to her room and continued getting ready, it was almost time to walk down the aisle and become Mrs. Justin Greene, and she wanted everything to be perfect. She picked up the makeup remover wipes and swiped at her body, no longer wishing to be covered with such fakeness in what was about to become such a pure moment. She wanted everyone to be able to see her, Morgan Amy Fisher, in all her natural beauty on her wedding day. As she cleared away the last of her makeup, both of her parents walked into the room, gasping at what they saw in front of them. They had never seen Morgan like this before and she was overjoyed that they were finally getting to see the real her.

She held a single finger up to her lips, not wanting to hear what they had to say, and her father took her arm and together they descended the stairs to the entrance of the ballroom where the ceremony was taking place. Her father walked her down the makeshift aisle towards Justin, the love of her life, and as she passed, everyone gasped upon the revelation of the brand new Morgan.

Morgan smiled at them all and maintained her composure throughout the ceremony until it was her turn to say "I do." With Justin and everyone else she knew looking at her, she managed to look straight into Justin's eyes and tell him exactly what she knew she must.

"I don't," she whispered quietly.

There was a ripple in the crowd as what simple Morgan Fisher said, spread backwards. Morgan knew that they would all be angered by her declaration, but she didn't really care what they thought anymore. They never thought that she deserved him in the first place, and they were right. No one deserved Justin.

Morgan looked to her right and she could see how angry Justin was and how much he was holding back from doing something they both knew he would regret doing in public. Morgan turned to the one and only person she had trusted with her secret, her best friend Marie, and gestured to the zipper on her dress. Marie, who was smiling at Morgan's boldness, did not question her, and slowly she unzipped her out of the dress that Morgan hated so much.

As the dress fell around her ankles, Morgan made no motion to cover up the bruises that marred her tiny frame. She knew that they would all judge her for being too thin, she agreed with them all. She also knew that they would judge her for the bruises as well, and while she didn't care what they thought, she did believe that it was time that they all knew the truth about their golden boy.

She stepped away from Marie and Justin, and faced the crowd of people seated in front of her with no shame. "I'm so glad that you could all make it here today," she started out, her voice shaking a bit.

"The reason that I'm so happy you're all here, is that I get to show you the real me. No makeup, no long sleeved shirts, no more hiding, just me," and as she went on her voice grew stronger.

"I thought that I had to take this from him, but I don't. I thought that this was my fault, but it's not. No one should have to take this from someone who they love. No one should be treated the way that I have been treated."

As she gazed out at the crowd she began to meet each of their eyes. Morgan had never felt better than she did in that moment. Bared before all, exposed to her naked skin and very soul, Morgan was finally finding her inner strength and beauty.

“I refuse to take this from him anymore. I refuse to let him walk all over me. I may be quiet and shy, but I am not weak. I am strong and I will prevail. I don’t care what you all think of me, but I do care that you finally know the truth, and this is it. Justin beat me. It’s as simple as that. I won’t go into the details and I won’t blame anyone for not answering my calls for help because I never really tried to ask for help, but I am now. I’m asking you to do something if you ever see anything like this happening again after hearing my story and seeing me today. You too have the courage to stand up and say something if this is happening to you or if it’s happening to someone you care about. Because it isn’t right.”

After this statement, it appeared that Morgan had run out of things to say, and looking out at all of the people she had been surrounded by while growing up, she saw tears. The tears startled Morgan, as she hadn’t expected that her words would have that much of an effect on anyone and in seeing everyone else’s tears, Morgan began to shed tears of her own.

She faced Justin slowly and locked eyes with him. The anger was radiating off of him in waves, and Morgan knew that what she was about to say would push him over the edge, but it was something that had to be said.

“I’m sorry Justin. No. I’m not sorry, I’m sorry for you. You’re such a pitiful person and I can’t believe that I never had the courage to say anything before. I can’t believe that I almost threw my life away by marrying you and believing all those lies you told me about not being good enough and how I never deserved you. You were so right about that last part. No one deserves the hell you put me through.”

Morgan took a deep breath for the last and hardest part of her speech, and calmly released it. “I loved you Justin. I still love you. I love you more than words could ever explain and maybe you love me too, but love isn’t always enough. Sometimes Justin, forever should only have one r because sometimes forever is meant to end.”

As the last syllable slipped through her lips, she watched as Justin lunged at her in what seemed like slow motion. She was ready for him though, and for the first time ever she stepped away and he didn’t touch her. Morgan threw her shoulders back, lifted her head up high, and left the ballroom with all the dignity that she could muster.

Was she wearing clothes? No. But that didn’t matter because for the first time Morgan was wearing something else that was far more important than clothes.

True love. For herself.

