

stacy austin egan

IF JANIE SHOUTED BACK

I TELL TRAVIS WE'RE GOING TO MEET AT THE PARK where Janie disappeared or we're not going to meet at all. He wants to *talk*, a word we've used to mean reunite, remind ourselves of what we've lost, then damage each other irreparably. There is false security in the familiar, and given enough time, we forget who it is that can hurt us the most. Whatever Travis has in mind, I'm not meeting him to rekindle anything; I need help because the nightmares are back: the ones where Janie and I are kids microwaving our Halloween candy or prank-calling boys and hanging up when their mothers answer. Then, Janie turns pale, dirt begins to blot her skin, and when I look up, I start screaming and she is too, always the same word, so desperate, and terrified, and loud: *wait*. Travis owes me, I won't sleep well until I test my theory, and I tell myself it's that simple.

Janie has been gone for ten years. We were fifteen when she disappeared. She'd called me around two in the morning crying, saying she needed to show me something. I'd met her at the playground in our subdivision where she'd walked into the woods behind the park and never walked out. I'd shouted for her, assumed she was playing games, gone home and slept. On day four of the search, a police dog dug up Janie's hairclip. In ten years, there have been hundreds of false leads and nothing else. If Janie is dead, it's probably my fault, and if she's alive, I hate her.

I don't tell Travis about the nightmares when he calls to ask about meeting at Kerbey Lane, the diner we used to frequent when I was at UT. Two years ago, I would have done it: the awkward conversation over coffee thing — adding sugar, adding milk. I would have agonized over what to wear, covered any imperfection with foundation, done my ponytail three times until it was exactly between carefree and polished. I don't do those things now: all that work just to be unseen.

Walking from the car to the park, I remind myself that this time is different and shove my hands in the pocket of my hoodie to keep them warm. It's almost the New Year; Austin is cold but not in a way that will stick around, winter an accessory.

Travis is already on the bench. He has a beanie pulled down almost to his dark eyes, hasn't shaved, and I hate myself for liking the way he says my name like the word hello, but I still do.

In a different life, one where I'd called for help ten years ago, I'd be nothing more to him than the grown up childhood friend of his sister's; we wouldn't keep in touch to punish ourselves. I wouldn't be always searching: in traffic until I hear horns blaring, or on rainy days, walking fast through puddles to glance under umbrellas — *the next one*, I tell myself, *the next one*. It could always be. Maybe. I hold my breath as I slide next to him, aware of his gaze.

"I thought you might've changed your mind," he says.

"I didn't," I say.

Travis has the same thick dark hair and olive skin as Janie, and I can't help but imagine what she would look like now. Maybe her breasts had gotten bigger, and she wouldn't complain about them anymore. Maybe she'd be tanner, like she had come back from vacation somewhere warm.

"Thanks for coming, Casey," Travis says. He leans over and touches my cheek with his thumb. "You have an eyelash." It's not an apology, but the intimacy of the gesture makes me want to forgive him anyway.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" I ask. I twist Janie's silver rings her mom gave to me the year after she disappeared around my finger. The distraction calms me. "Did you find something out?"

I can tell I've hurt his feelings by the way he leans back; he doesn't want to need a reason to call, but he didn't do anything to stop it from becoming that way. "Not exactly." He unbuttons his flannel even though it isn't warm.

I click the flashlight he brought on and pan it around. I know his arms are toned, courtesy of working in construction and living on ibuprofen, but I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing me look.

I feel anger like a pulse. Janie has kept Travis and I tethered, sharing custody of this thing we can't even name. "I thought maybe you'd heard something" is all I say.

"My Mom is going to hold a funeral service for Janie," Travis says.

"Are you — serious?" I say, turning and shining the light in his eyes before clicking it off.

"She thinks it will help her," he says.

“What are you gonna bury...*a hairclip?*”

“Jesus, Casey. That’s why I wasn’t going to just say it.” He rubs the back of his head. “My Mom thinks that if Janie were alive, we would know...something.”

I stand up, even though I have nowhere to go. “You were planning to tell me this at Kerbey Lane?”

“Is there a good place to say it?”

“Not in the middle of a fucking restaurant,” I feel my eyes stinging.

“Oh, well I’m glad we’re out *here* then,” he says, gesturing towards the playground.

I turn away.

“Are you leaving?” He asks.

He must see me flinch at the word because he immediately comes to me and puts his flannel around my shoulders. It smells like the dryer sheets I bought. “I didn’t mean it like that,” he says pulling his arms around me.

“You can’t let them.” My vision is blurred, and I am, admittedly, not thinking of the people that could be helped by pretending to bury Janie. I’m thinking about those dreams; I’m thinking about whether or not she screamed; I’m thinking that I won’t leave here without knowing.

“I’m sorry about last year,” he whispers, still holding me.

I let the apology hang because I’m so tired of both of us trying to atone for what we cannot fix. “I can’t go home with you,” I say, even though I love the way the top of my head just touches his chin.

“Fair enough,” he says, but I know it’s not the same as an agreement.

“I need your help,” I say. I think about ninth grade: how Janie said that to me, then kissed me to see if it made her feel anything. She’d told me it didn’t. “I’m having those nightmares.” I don’t say that I miss him being there when I wake up.

“You still see that therapist?”

“Sometimes,” I say. I pull away from him, turn the flashlight on and head in the direction of the woods. “She always talked about running away.” I know it’s juvenile, but I still want to think of her in a foreign country, wearing a scarf and large sunglasses.

“I don’t think that’s what happened, Case.” I know he’s exasperated; he’s told me about reports from the private investigators his parents hired, said that death