

The room is full. People dressed in black gather around a closed casket. Beside it sits a framed photograph of Jess's mother, smiling at her.

Jess enters the cold funeral hall, staring ahead. She wheels herself through the crowd. It feels as though everyone here is more important than her, as if she's not allowed to take up space in this world.

She pushes her way through, making it to the front. She stares at her mother's photograph, expressionless.

What is there to express about something like this?

Her eyes move to her second-oldest sister, Emily, who kneels on the floor, sobbing. The eldest, Claire, stands tall beside her, seemingly unaffected.

To her right, she sees her father, his eyes still wet with tears. Sophie, the youngest, holds his right hand. She's only eight, but there's a deep knowing in her eyes.

Another hand holds his left. A woman's hand. An engagement ring adorns her finger.

Jess glares at the beautiful diamond with spiteful eyes, wanting to rip it off. If her father weren't there and no one else were in the room, that's exactly what she would do.

The woman beside her father has kind but sad eyes. She's pretty, but not eye-catching, dressed in a rather plain black dress. A hat partly veils her face. There's a fringe and some loose threads along the bottom of her dress. Jess can tell she's had it for years, though it might be the most expensive thing she owns.

The woman smiles at her father, and he smiles back.

Jess looks away.

When she looks back, a boy stands in front of her, placing a flower beside the casket. He's tall, about her age, with handsome features she can't help but notice. There's something gentle but strong about the way he carries himself.

He pauses for a moment, lowering his head in a simple nod before turning.

His eyes meet Jess's, giving her a soft smile. It makes her stop for a moment, unsure of what it makes her feel. She catches herself before scowling back at him, annoyed.

He's careful to step over her foot without knocking into her, though she is blocking his way. Somehow, it makes her feel out of place.

He comes to stand on the other side of her father's fiancée. She wraps an arm around his shoulder.

Jess catches a resemblance in their eyes, that same soft-hearted demeanor. She catches her father giving him an approving wink.

It makes her simmer.

No wonder he was so kind. He was her son.

Her father had talked about him a lot. He was like the perfect child, but her father always seemed to put off letting him meet the rest of the family.

To think that even for a moment she'd thought his face was remotely attractive makes her sick. She usually loves pretty things and beautiful people, but the diamond on her soon-to-be stepmother drives her mad, and her son's perfect presence makes her want to scream.

She backs away, wheeling herself through the crowd. It feels like the walls are closing in, and she needs to breathe.

Jess bursts through the doors of the funeral hall and onto the street. She sighs, breathing in the cold air and shivering.

All she wants is to let it go.

To let it all go.

Her head tilts upward toward the sky, her eyes closed. Snow falls against her skin.

She opens her eyes.

The door of the funeral hall opens behind her, and she hears the murmuring of voices inside.

"Jess," Emily calls out to her. "Come inside. We're eating soon."

"Okay," Jess replies, as if it's a normal day.

Who could think about eating on a day like this?

Emily shivers at the cold and shrugs, turning back inside. It isn't unusual for her little sister to be stubborn.

After a few moments of watching the snowfall over the empty road, Jess turns back inside.

When she enters the noisy hall, she takes another deep breath.

Making her way to the dining hall, she pauses at the entrance.

Her father, soon-to-be stepmother, and the rest of the family are sitting around the table, smiling and laughing. Sophie is sitting on that woman's lap. Emily seems engaged in conversation.

Claire isn't there, but she's probably drinking at one of the tables or with her boyfriend.

Jess places her hand on the door handle before letting go.

Is there any reason for her to go inside?

Do they need her anymore, let alone her mother?

Is she the only one mourning?

Jess turns and moves back toward the funeral hall.

When she enters the room, it's quiet and empty.

It's just her and her mother now.

A deep heaviness settles over her, and for the first time, she feels like crying. At first, it starts small, before shaking every fiber of her body. Even her numb legs seem to feel something, and it breaks her.

Slipping out of the chair, she crashes onto the floor despite her weak limbs, struggling toward her mother's casket.

She sobs, unable to control her tears as she reaches it. She pulls herself up onto her knees, embracing the side of the casket, her face pressed against her mother's photograph as if it were the last goodbye she'd never gotten.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I'm sorry," she says through her tears. "I'm so sorry."

When the tears finally stop, she feels the weight begin to dissipate, letting herself sink back down. She sighs, remaining seated on the floor for a moment.

She stares at her mother's photograph one last time, giving a small, respectful nod.

This is it.

This is letting go.

She cannot go back again.

Her mother asked her to be strong, and that is what she will be.

Drying her tears, she turns and makes her way back toward her wheelchair, pulling herself up.

She doesn't know that Liam has been watching, still holding a plate of food for her. Emily had told him that Jess hadn't eaten yet, so he thought maybe she wanted to eat alone.

When he entered the main hall, he'd heard her crying, but he didn't feel right about going in. When he saw her on the floor, he even thought about rushing in, but something stopped him.

It felt like a moment he wasn't meant to touch, a moment she needed alone.

So he waited.

But watching her now, it hurts to see her struggle alone.

When she slips while trying to get back to her chair, he sets aside the plate and his worries, coming to her aid.

He grabs her arm.

"Are you all right?"

Jess pauses, caught off guard. She didn't expect anyone to be there.

*Are you all right?*

That question festers a deep wound. No one had ever asked her before, and she hated the answer.

Grabbing hold of the wheelchair, she yanks her arm away and shoots him a sharp glare.

Who does he think he is?

At first, Liam pauses, unsure of how to respond. Is she angry that he helped, or is it simply because she's upset?

He understands what it's like to lose someone. It's reasonable to be angry. He's been that way too.

Brushing aside his feelings, he spots something on the floor.

A black hairpin.

Jess's hairpin.

He picks it up.

Looking up, he finds her already halfway out the door.

"Wait," he says, rushing over to her. "I think this is yours."