

I was born and raised in Chicago.

My mother was a first-generation immigrant from Korea. My father was a factory worker from Detroit. They'd settled on a life in the outskirts of the Windy City and I'd been living in its clutches ever since. It had never crossed my mind that as I graduated high school and became a fully-fledged adult, I'd ever leave the place for something bigger or better. My options were where I'd always been: right here in the heart of the rain, and the snow, and the excessive heat. Why hadn't I picked myself up and moved somewhere else? *Anywhere* else. Not even somewhere fancy like Los Angeles, or regal like Massachusetts, but just one state over in any direction. Just to put enough space between the place I'd always known and the me that was supposed to be growing up.

I remember my first day on campus, dragging my suitcase along behind me because I'd managed to convince my family that I wouldn't kill myself my Freshman year. Then I met Adam, my roommate, and on the first day of his company, realized that it might have been a lie. I'd probably end up going home in a body bag, a nice little letter stapled to my ear:

*Here lies Charlie, who with one taste of freedom, became absolutely insufferable and broke the only promise he'd made his parents. What a fucking idiot.*

I figured after a few years, the behavior would come to a head. I'd wake up one day and decide that I'd go back to my basic roots and do nothing at all. Just dress well, carry my ass to class, and learn until I was bursting at the seams with information for others to peruse, like an old and worn-down encyclopedia. Not quite disposable, but about as close to it as was humanly possible. A walking brain. A good reference manual. But that never happened, and by mid-way through my senior year, I found myself on the cusp of graduation with a half-finished tattoo under my shirt.

By that point, I'd begun to work at a coffee shop. It was a cliché hipster hangout that challenged me in absolutely zero ways, but I loved everything about it. My boss was

a middle-aged woman named Nayyirah whose glasses were perfect circles over her eyes, always running down her nose to the point that they might have fallen off if she moved too quickly. She was well-dressed but her clothes were hidden behind an old and shoddy apron that was covered in drawings of snacks that she'd doodled in her free time.

I walked in every day to the same thing; scattered students sitting at the small wooden tables, clicking on their keyboards as they sipped from their mugs of chai, and Nayyirah was always behind the counter, smiling at me.

"A doughnut today, huh?" She asked me. Her voice croaked - as far as I knew, she wasn't a smoker, but her voice still sounded like rocks being rubbed against one another.

"Yeah. They're having a sale next door," I responded, going to the counter and dropping the small plastic bag between the two of us. "Four for the price of one. It's ridiculous."

The inside of the bag had gone sticky from the icing of the doughnuts, but Nayyirah stuck her hand in anyway and pulled one out for herself. Then she scooted the bag towards me again and leaned on the counter, shoving it into her mouth like a heathen.

"Let's see it then."

"Uh..." I said, looking down at the bag of doughnuts. "I already gave you one."

"I talked to Adam. You got a tattoo."

Goddamnit. Leave it to Adam.

I huffed and shoved my doughnut in my mouth, skirting around the counter so that I could put the bag of extras in the fridge and wiggle my way out of my coat. It was impossible to show what was under my shirt until I'd gotten down to the small sweater. I hung it up quickly and then held my breath as I lifted up the layers of clothing to expose my ribcage, and Nayyirah bent over so that she could get a closer look. Beneath a thin, shiny layer of ointment, was my tattoo.

"Wow. It's enormous! That's gonna cost an arm and a leg."

"No worries. I work the cash register at one of the highest paying cafes in Chicago."

Nayyirah scoffed and stood back up, shoveling the rest of her doughnut in her mouth and then reaching out to ruffle my hair. I swerved to avoid her prying fingers but found myself trapped against the counter, being pet like a dog.

“I hope you tipped him well,” She said. “It’s gorgeous.”

I released a breath that I’d forgotten I was holding. Nayyirah’s stamp of approval was something like platinum; a rare, expensive, valuable metal that common folk barely ever got to hold. She didn’t give opinions widely, but when she did they were honest and blunt, and often less than savory observations. I smiled despite myself, standing up and patting the wrinkles out of my clothes as Nayyirah mumbled something sweet and waltzed away, leaving me at the counter to bask in her compliments.

That’s how Adam found me an hour later, doozy and doe-eyed, staring at the cookies in the refrigeration unit. The bell to the store rang as he tripped in and he yelled, “Dude! Guess what I just got!”

“What?” I said, spaced out. It took him a moment to get to the counter and all the while, I couldn’t drag my eyes away from the chocolate chip cookies, fingers rubbing absentmindedly at the tattoo beneath my clothes.

“You alright?”

“Yeah,” I responded, finally looking away from the sweets. Adam’s hair was windswept and his cheeks were red. He’d been running. I asked him, “What’s up? What’d you get?”

“Invitations to a lil’ something something. We’re going out this weekend.”

“No, we’re not. I work.”

Adam huffed and then danced his way around the counter shamelessly. I scooted away from him thinking that he might come up to me and do something ridiculous but realized too late that he was waltzing his way back towards the office.

“No, no, I’m *working*,” I hissed, stumbling after him and grabbing his shirt. “What the fuck! Dude, don’t ask my boss.”

“I will ask your boss. *Yirah!*”

I reached out and wrapped my palm around his mouth, pushing him against the fridge in the process. His voice was a lost set of vibrations in my hand. He struggled to

get out of my grip. It wasn't the first time that our differences in height had worked against him.

"Dude, come on," Adam groaned, clawing my hands away from his mouth. "It's a convention, okay? Just a quick in and out if you don't wanna stay but I'm not going alone."

"What kind of convention?"

Adam reached out and tugged my sweater up, exposing my newly decorated ribs to the humid air of the cafe. I quickly pushed his hands away from myself and smoothed my clothes back down, looking around at the customers who had stopped paying us any attention. Adam sucked his teeth and smacked me on the shoulder.

"It's for tattoos. Hudson's gonna be there and I think you oughta show this thing off."

"You know I can't *show this thing off*," I reminded him. "I'm not supposed to have it!"

"As a whole adult man, you should be ashamed to even say that," Adam puffed. He was smiling, all straight, white teeth that seemed too brilliant to be real. He nudged past me and went to the register, grabbing one of the to-go cups so that he could start in on making his favorite drink. He was unhinged, suddenly full of energy now that he'd told me where we were going. He kept talking. "What if we dress you up? Slap a wig on you and call it a day? How the hell is your mom gonna find you at a tattoo convention if she doesn't go to them?"

"My mom isn't the only one who knows me. I have friends. Family."

Adam went quiet for a moment, futzing around with the equipment so that he could make himself some iced tea. He gathered his supplies and dumped them all in a pile on the counter; the teabag, the shaker, the sugar syrup, and the fruits that he liked to slip in afterwards. By the time he spoke again, his water had boiled and he was ripping open his tea bag so that he could steep it.

"I'm not trying to peer pressure you into this. Really. If I didn't think that this was something you'd like, I wouldn't even ask you to go. But you remember the night before we went to the shop, when you were choosing what tattoo you wanted and you

were just... I don't know. Happy. You looked happy. Excited. I think you really like this kind of thing, and it's not right that you have to sit it out because your parents have... stupid, old person views about 'em."

"It's not as simple as that," I argued.

"It is. This whole control thing? It's gotta stop. You wanna be fifty with your mom breathing down your neck?"

I took a deep breath and watched as Adam poked at his tea bag with a fork he'd found on the counter. I knew that he had a point. My parents had always been *those* parents. The kind that called on a Saturday evening to check in, or offered you the car because they knew they could count the miles on it when you returned it. I imagined them as an umbrella on a sunny day. Maybe at the beach, it might work. Maybe if it started raining, it might be useful. Every other day it was just another thing you had to carry, another shadow that you were forced to stand under. I shook my head and rubbed my eyes.