Ellie sat on that four-wheeler like she’d been born there, all wicked-sharp smiles and scraped-up knees. Her choppy brown hair fluttered behind her as she ascended the grassy hill, late afternoon sunlight glinting off the glossy black-and-blue monstrosity beneath her. She drove the way she smiled—with reckless abandon and something to prove.

Several yards behind, I followed her up the sun-bleached path on my own four-wheeler—the firetruck red one we’d “borrowed” from her older sister. My palms were clammy where they gripped the handlebars, a combination of my nervous nature and the summer heat, and yet I couldn’t help but grin as the Mississippi wind crashed across my face. My back had begun to ache from hunching over the controls, but with the fire pumping through my veins, I didn’t care.

“Not too bad for a first-timer!” Ellie yelled over her shoulder, a show of picture-perfect confidence. I’d never driven anything bigger than a go-kart before today, but initial fear had long given way to the rush of adrenaline, and the laughter bubbling up from my throat made something electrifying burst in my chest. I grinned and let out a resounding whoop before squeezing down the throttle and tearing my way down the path. Ellie’s voice echoed in my head from when she’d given me my first lesson earlier that day: Just like a butterfly’s wing, she’d told me, and I’d looked down and imagined a little white-and-gray butterfly beneath my thumb, right where the pad of the throttle was. You gotta press down on it gently, she’d instructed, real delicate, like you’re holding a butterfly.
I streaked across the grass after her, watching with mad glee as the number on my speedometer climbed higher and higher. I came up behind her, then swerved wide and passed her on the right, watching her head whip to the side in disbelief, eyes wide, awe-struck smile even wider.

“Oh shit!” she squawked, brown eyes sparkling, before cackling and revving her engine. Heart pounding with excitement, I forced my gaze back to the road in front of me, and didn’t dare look back to see what she’d do next.

I began to crest the colossal hill, and in the space of a single breath, the world widened into a panoramic landscape before me, bracketed above by a sky of cornflower blue extending in all directions, and below by verdant, rolling hills. I tasted the sweat on my lips, felt the heat of the summer sun kissing my skin, and for a moment outside of time, everything seemed to slow down.

It was just me and the blue-orange sky and the trees’ shadows stretching long into the valleys below, and all together, we were weightless. The warm summer air tickled my cheeks and my neck as it swirled past me, sending my blond curls flying in every direction. I breathed in slow through my nose, savoring the earthy scent of the dirt and the brush, and I knew I was breathing in magic. I understood then why they call it golden hour, that time of day when light and shadow stretch up and up forever, and when new colors glow and burn and flicker all around. The time of day when it was just me and Ellie and the hill.

And then, I breathed out, and the world came rushing back as if I’d never left it. I heard the roar of an engine as Ellie raced past me, a midnight blur against the dappled afternoon sky. She let her momentum carry her forward a few yards more before she
started to decelerate and pull off to the side. I hit the hand brake and followed her off the path, rolling to a stop between a pair of massive black oaks. As the engine quieted, I realized I was panting for breath, as if I’d been the one running fifty miles an hour, not the four-wheeler.

Ellie set the gear in park and turned the ignition off, then hopped down to the ground with a slight stumble. I followed her lead and did the same, grinning and wiping the sweat from my forehead. She bounced over to me, giddy in a way she so rarely was, and I couldn’t help but find it contagious.

“So? How was it?” she asked, throwing her arms out wide. From her gesture and her smug smile, she might as well have thought she’d shown me the whole world.

“Pretty freaking amazing,” I breathed out, and she laughed and gave a fist pump. “Aw, hell yeah, I knew it!” she cheered. For once, I didn’t say anything about the cussing; I was too hopped up on endorphins to really care. I stepped down off the quad and felt my legs wobble beneath me.

Ellie scampered over to the back of her four-wheeler and called out, “C’mere! I wanna show you something.” She’d positioned hers nearly perfectly between the two trees, and my mouth dropped open in wonder as I stretched my neck to look up and up at the light filtering down through the branches.

She snorted-laughed and scooted her butt over, dangling her legs over the edge of the metal rack. I glanced over then did the same, swinging my feet back and forth so they bumped into hers.
She grinned conspiratorially at me as she pulled out her iPod Touch, then unplugged the earbuds and began scrolling in search of something. “God, my mom still won’t let me have a real phone,” she groused, eyes glued to the screen. “Like, I’m almost fourteen, can you believe this? It’s like the stupid crosswalk thing all over again.” Her mom hadn’t let her walk to school by herself until the second semester of sixth grade, and she still hadn’t shut up about it. I hummed in agreement.

Her eyes lit up as she finished her search, then she set her phone down between us on the rack. “Okay,” she said, “but here’s what I wanted to show you. I’m about to change your life. Ready?” Her thumb hovered over the screen before her eyes flicked up at me, and she nodded her head forward as if to say, *Well? Go on!*

I rolled my eyes, a smile pulling at my lips. “Ready!” She nodded once in approval, then bumped her shoulder against mine and hit play. Through the crappy iPod speakers, the unhurried tinkling of piano notes carried into the evening air, followed by the hum of synth, and a single voice, a rock-and-roll lullaby. Then the drum line kicked in like a heartbeat, low, steady, and instinctive, followed by the thrumming rhythm of a guitar.

“This,” Ellie said, looking me straight in the eyes, “is The Killers. Now, this song’s called *All These Things That I’ve Done,* and you’re gonna love it, trust me.” She always said that. Trust me. Like I somehow wouldn’t, or like there was a reason for me not to. I nodded, then leaned back on my hands and looked up at the horizon in front of us, at the darkening sky blossoming into a resplendence of pinks and reds. Light and shadow danced on our skin, glinting off the digital watch face on Ellie’s wrist. I fiddled with the rings on my right hand and looked out at the valleys and the sky again.
“Dude!” Ellie said suddenly, breaking the near-silent rhapsody. “What if—” she started, then cut herself off in a fit of giggles. “We could totally just, like, run away! Grab our bags, hop on the four-wheelers, and we’d be gone, just like that!” she said with a snap of her fingers. “Come on, you know it’d be great!”

I laughed, but it felt awkward and sticky in my chest, and I hoped the nervousness didn’t show on my face. She got like this, sometimes. Started talking big and loud and wild, and it always unsettled me because I could never tell how much of it was a joke or not. As if maybe I’d wake up one day and she really had run away, and this time, for good.

Her posture relaxed, and the fire blazing in her eyes dimmed to smoldering embers. “Seriously, Autumn, dude, I’m just so glad you’re here right now. You’re the first actual friend I’ve been able to invite to the farm, and it’s kinda like my happy place,” she admitted. I let out a breath, a genuine smile creeping back onto my face.

“Yeah no, it’s super cool here, dude. I totally get why you love it,” I replied. There was something electrifying here, something special, as if Ellie’s very spirit had been forged here long before she’d been born.

“I was kinda joking before,” she continued, back to her usual soft, raspy tone, “but it almost feels like running away, y’know? Out on the four-wheelers and everything.”

“Yeah,” I laughed. It really did. My gaze flicked around, at the clouds and the trees and the leaves tangled up in the grass. I looked, and I saw that this was Ellie’s domain, and perhaps Ellie’s alone. The wind carried her like a greeting, and the wild
grass seemed to part before her with the same love and adulation she carried in herself always.

I really did love her, even if it was hard to remember sometimes. But right then, it felt like the easiest thing, to know I had a best friend who loved me back, too. I scooted closer and leaned my head on her shoulder. Her black t-shirt was hot beneath my cheek, and I closed my eyes against the light of the setting sun. I could feel the movement of Ellie’s legs swinging back and forth from where they hung over the back of the four-wheeler, skinned-up knees dangling right next to mine.

“We have to do this again sometime,” she said suddenly, quietly. “Like, I know we still have tomorrow, but we should come back again next summer, or something like that.”

“For sure,” I agreed, and I looked forward to it.

“You promise?” she asked, a hint of laughter on her tongue.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding my head against her shoulder, “of course.” I smiled, and I didn’t need to open my eyes to know that she was smiling, too.

“Cool,” she said, and the music played out between us, the security of a promise lingering in the air.
II

Something buzzed once, twice, in the darkness. Then, for a moment, all was silent again, punctuated only by the soft, steady hum of the box fan by the foot of the bed.

The something buzzed again, this time steady and pulsating. Since when did I set an alarm on Saturdays? I blinked my eyes open and let out a sluggish groan, tangled blonde hair still clinging to my sleep-warm skin. I rolled over onto my side, reaching out to snooze the alarm, then froze, my hand hovering over my phone screen.

*Incoming call from: Ellie Fosch*

Accept        Decline

I squinted down at my phone screen, brows furrowed. What the fuck? Ellie never called anymore. And she certainly never did before ten AM. The buzzing stopped, and the screen dimmed. The call had gone to voicemail. Unplugging my phone, I sat up and swung my legs over the side of the bed. I cradled the phone in my lap and stared blankly down at the darkened screen, rubbing my thumb idly back and forth across the power button.

It was summer, and bright morning light trickled in through the gaps in the blinds next to my bed. Summer, and I never had gone back to Ellie’s farm. Summer—and senior graduation was in two weeks.

I clicked my phone on. Sitting at the top of my notifications list were two texts and one missed call, all from Ellie.
– *U free this weekend!* (5m ago)

– **?** (5m ago)

I bit at the skin around my left thumbnail and swiped open my phone. I navigated my way over to our text conversation and reread our most recent text thread.

**Wed, Apr 14, 9:04 PM**

– Happy Birthday!!!! :D <3

  *thanks!! :)* –

My curser blinked in the empty text box. I blinked back at it.

_Nope_, I sent back, then clicked my phone off and dropped it back down onto the bed.

The mattress buzzed beneath me. So what if we hadn’t talked like two months? She was reaching out now, wasn’t she? Isn’t this what I wanted? The mattress buzzed again. I flipped my phone face-up.

– _Nope like ur busy?_

– _Or nope like u can come_

_I can come_, I replied. I didn’t let myself hesitate or think too hard about it, or I might’ve chickened out. My phone buzzed again, and I held my breath as I read the next text, as if I were about to plunge myself underwater.
– *Awesome! Pack a bag, farmgirl*

I heaved myself out of bed, then padded over to the bedroom window and flicked open the blinds. It was a perfect summer's day, just like last time, only Ellie had finally gotten her phone. And a driver's license, and a car, and some new friends. I wondered if she’d still kept her old iPod somewhere, tucked away in a drawer like an ancient, rose-tinted memory— or maybe like a dirty secret.

I swallowed and turned to my wardrobe, shooting off a quick text to my mom before getting dressed. I had some packing to do.

It was strange, riding in Ellie's car. It was just the two of us in her mom’s old truck, the one she used to drive Ellie and me around in. The smell of hay and dog hair was more faded, now, but the leather detailing was as worn and smooth as I’d remembered. It was both pleasantly familiar and yet unfathomably foreign all at once, because for all the time I'd spent riding in this car, it had never been Ellie in the driver’s seat.

“Oh fuck yeah, turn that shit up, baby!” Ellie crowed, reaching for the volume dial. I laughed as the music blasted through the speakers, but it all felt fake. Ellie grinned and rolled the windows down, never mind that we were going almost sixty on a state road. My ponytail whipped to the side, buffeted about by the wind. Ellie waggled her eyebrows at me and screamed along to the song, off-key, voice-cracking perfection. I shook my head and laughed despite myself, for real this time, feeling it bubble up inside
me like a soda can. Ellie’s hair blew all around in a mess of black-and-red chaos as she cheered and pumped her fist in the air.

I sputtered as my hair flew into my open mouth, and I scrambled to roll my window back up. Ellie cringed too when the wind suddenly roared through her open window, and she quickly rolled hers back up in response. The radio blared in the background as we caught our breath, our windblown hair tousled up in wild, frizzy manes.

“We’re almost there,” Ellie said, flashing her teeth.

“Cool,” I replied. I turned and looked out the window at all the trees and hills passing by. It blurred like a film reel, only the pictures were all in fast forward, leaving us behind. I wondered what would be waiting for me at Ellie’s farm. If the doors would be all rusted, if the grass would be overgrown. Maybe they’d torn some trees down, built a new deck or shed or boathouse. Maybe it wouldn’t remember me at all.

“So,” Ellie continued, breaking the silence. I started, then turned over to face her. She grinned at me, that same old fire in her eyes that I swore would never go out. It matched her hair now. “You still up for some grillin’?” She exaggerated the Southern accent; God, she sounded like her dad.

“You know it,” I answered easily, pasting on a grin. The fizzy feeling from before had gone flat.

Ellie barreled on, “Awesome, ‘cause that’s the stuff I’ve got in the cooler. It’s funny, I’d actually asked Lex and Addie to come with me first, and they’d wanted to grill out.”

I blinked. I had no idea who those people were.
She laughed, blissfully unaware of the nervous fluttering behind my ribcage. “Uh, but then they fucking bailed on me, and I didn’t wanna have to drive all the way down here to check on the farm by myself like some sad sack, y’know? So, like, thanks for coming with me—I know I should’ve said that earlier.” It felt like a chasm opened up between us in those few seconds of her talking, something wide and jagged and ugly, and I was standing alone at the top of it, cold and confused.

There was this trick I used to play on myself, where if I concentrated hard enough, I could look at something—a room or a person—and make myself forget what it looked like. For just the briefest of moments, I’d look at that thing like I was a stranger to it, seeing it for the first time, and I’d be able to see what other people saw when they looked at it through new eyes.

I looked over at Ellie with my new eyes and saw a stranger. The person sitting there was the same person I’d grown up with, I knew that. But that little kid didn’t have red-and-black hair or a tattoo she kept hidden from her parents, or a big Chevrolet truck or a mean personality. That little kid didn’t even have a cellphone.


“What?” She asked, forehead creased in concern. “You good?”

Just peachy, I thought.

But instead, I said, “You’re different now.” Her jaw dropped open, her gaze flickering between me and the windshield, and I laughed. I really hadn’t meant to say that.

“You—you’re saying I’ve changed?” Ellie asked, her voice climbing higher. “I’ve changed? Well maybe that’s a good thing.” She scoffed. She was working herself into a
frenzy now. “Or maybe, maybe I haven’t changed at all! How would you even know, anyway?”

“Oh fuck off, you literally invited me here,” I spit, wrenching myself around in my seat to face her.

“And you said yes,” she shot back, hands clenched on the wheel. The seat belt dug into my gut and pinched at my neck, rough and sharp, but I think I liked it. I said nothing.

Ellie snorted. Any initial trace of hurt or betrayal had since disappeared, replaced by a wall of pure defiance. At least that was familiar.

“You know,” she started, shaking her head, “everyone else is always changing. But really, I’m the only one who’s stayed the same. The exact same. I’m the same person I was in middle school, and all through high school. At least I’ve got the nerve to be authentic about it.” She said it with pride, and I thought, oh. I stared at Ellie, at her Good Charlotte t-shirt and unkempt hair and busted up knuckles.

*This isn’t fair,* I thought. Not me, not her. Not this thing hovering in the air between us. The tension of months of silence, years of drifting. It wasn’t like I didn’t have any new friends, either. It wasn’t like I hadn’t grown up—no more ponytails, no more chipped nail polish. Hell, I’d lost all my old rings, even the one Ellie had gotten me for my twelfth birthday. (It was my birthstone. Faux-silver band, tiny garnet stone. A splash of red glittering on my knuckles. Ellie’s favorite color. Maybe that part really hadn’t changed, if her hair was any indication.)

“Maybe,” I ventured, my throat burning, “maybe we’ve both changed.” Ellie pursed her lips, shaking her head fiercely. Then she huffed. Her shoulders slumped
forcefully, but she kept her deathgrip on the wheel. I settled back in my seat and adjusted my seatbelt, suddenly exhausted, like my body’d been torn open and scraped raw; I gazed out through the windshield at the cornflower skies, and I wished it were raining.

We were quiet for a while after that. Then, like some perverted miracle, Ellie spoke.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and she sounded a little bit fucking devastated. I wanted to ask, What for?

I glanced over at her for a moment, and she was crying. I couldn’t remember if I’d ever seen Ellie cry before, with puffy eyes and flushed, wet cheeks. She wiped the tears away with the back of her wrist and took in a shaky breath.

“You mean a lot to me,” I said, surprising myself. I paused to regroup, then continued, “But we’re probably never gonna be as close as we were. It’s just—we’re just different now, and that’s okay, I guess. I just…it makes things hard sometimes, and I don’t like that.” Ellie didn’t reply.

Ellie must’ve turned the music down at some point, but it was still thrumming quietly in the background. Other than that, the remaining twenty minutes of the drive were silent, but not tense. We pulled off onto a paved backroad, which turned to gravel after a couple miles, leading us up through the open metal gate and into the front yard of the farm house. Ellie parked the car, cut the ignition, and unbuckled her seatbelt. I did the same, then sat back in my seat. Neither of us made any move to get out.

Then, without warning, she reached over the center console and put her arm around my shoulder, pulling me into a hug. I curled my free arm around her and
squeezed back, but I couldn’t shake the feeling of wrongness. Even her hugs felt
different now. It lasted only a moment or two, before she pulled back, and I loosened my
grip so she could slither away. I heard Ellie sigh as I turned my back to her, opening the
car door. The gravel crackled and crunched beneath my busted-up tennis shoes, and I
shut the door behind me without looking back. I peered up at the faded blue farmhouse,
and through the phantom of nostalgia, it looked just as I remembered it.

I heard the driver’s side door slam shut, and I turned around in time to see Ellie
hop up onto the hood of the truck. She leaned back against the windshield, extending
her legs out in front of her, and patted the silver metal in the space beside her. I climbed
up beside her, stretching my legs out side-by-side next to hers.

The space between us was still and quiet, making miles out of inches; in that no
man’s land, a butterfly settled onto the hood, right beside my ankle. Its wings bowed to
us, folding and unfolding, like careful breathing. Not white and gray like I had imagined
all those summers ago, but black gossamer wings, tinged with gleaming ribbons of blue.
I closed my eyes and tilted my head up into the warmth of the setting sun, the hum of
cicadas drowning out the world.

It was summer, again. Except there were no heads on shoulders and Ellie’s legs
didn’t dangle, and there were no more promises left for us to keep.