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-Mom I had to escape my reality chapter 1 WILLA hasn't changed much since she left. Come on, unpack. Make yourself comfortable. I have more work to do at home. We'll go in the morning and get you enrolled for school, Nonna said as the pinched frown on her face that's been there since she picked me up at the bus station an hour ago, only became more pronounced. Don't go anywhere. Can you hear me? Stay where you are until I get back. I got a nod. I couldn't tell her more than to thank her since I saw her. The last time I saw my nonna was two years ago, when she had saved enough money to come visit us in Little Rock. It's been a big part of my life. There were times in my childhood when I thought no one else loved me. I knew he loved me. Nona never let me down. Seeing the obvious frustration in her gaze now was hard to swallow. But I didn't expect anything different. It was a look I was used to. I saw it in everyone's eyes these days when they were looking at me. No one believed me. Not my mother, certainly not my stepfather, or the cop who had me arrested. Not even my brother. No one. Which meant my nonna wouldn't believe me either. I'm sure she agreed to pick me up when my mother packed my bags and left them for me on the front porch the day I was released from the correctional facility I'd spent the last six months. I had nowhere to go, and calling my mother's mother was the only thing I knew how to do. I lived with Nona until the summer I turned eleven. Her house was the only real house I've ever known. My mother had finally decided that she could take care of me, the child she had at fifteen and left with her mother the day she graduated from high school three years later. When my brother Chance was eight, his father had finally married my mother. He wanted to bring me into the family. The problem was, I never fit in. My younger brother was adored by his father, and he seemed to always be a hindrance. I kept to myself until I turned fifteen and everything started to change. Answer me, Willa, Nonna asked to get me out of my thoughts. Yes, ma'am, I answered quickly. I didn't mean to upset her. It was all I had left. Nonna's expression softened. Then shake your head. Good. I'll be back as soon as my work in the big house is done, he added, then he turned around and left, leaving me in the bedroom that was mine for the first eleven years of my life. I was happy here. I felt wanted here. But I screwed up, too. I was good at screwing up. If there was a wrong decision to make, I was able to make it. I was going to put this in the I wanted to get back the girl I used to be. The girl whose grandmother was proud of her. The girl who didn't do her part of the attention. The attention I had gotten from my mother wasn't the kind of attention I wanted. In the end I lost her. He didn't want anything to do with me. I had killed every love he had for me. Once I closed the door behind Nonna, she sank down to the double bed that was covered with a duvet I knew my nonna had made herself. She liked the quilt in her spare time. Which wasn't very often. He worked six days a week for the Lawtons. They let her go on Sunday to go to church and clean her house. Which happened to be a cottage on the edge of their property. She was the Lawton cleaner and cooked for as long as I could remember. My mother had grown up in this house. This room I was in was hers once. Even though I was the product of a mistake my mother had made, my childhood here was happy. Nonna had given me the love and protection that my teenage mother didn't know how to give. And then there were the boys. Gunner Lawton and Brady Higgins were my two best friends. Gunner lived in the big house with his parents and older brother, Rhett. Ever since he and Brady caught me in his treehouse playing with his men when we were four, we've been inseparable. I watched the boys go up to that tree house from my front yard to the cottage. I wanted to know what was up there. My curiosity had given me my first real friends. When I was gone with my mother, that was when things were starting to change with all three of us. I wasn't just one of the guys anymore. I was a girl and things were getting uncomfortable. That's when I thought I was in love with Brady. He was popular and had a smile that once made my heart flutter wildly when addressed to me. I thought he'd be the only boy I'd ever love. I was gone shortly after my feelings were starting to grow. Now I couldn't remember what any of the two boys looked like. There have been other boys in my life since then. Only one of them made a mark on me. Just one of the ones I'd loved. Carl Daniels. I thought he'd be mine forever. Until he decided that sleeping with other girls was acceptable when I wasn't giving him my virginity in the back of his car. He had proven to me that I really couldn't trust anyone. Loving someone meant getting hurt. My mother and Carl had shown me how vulnerable love can make you. I wouldn't make that mistake again. It seemed like another life now. Gunner and Brady were the safe and happy part of my past that I often dreamed of at night when I had to get away from my reality. My life here would be very different from the way it once was. I made a mistake I would never pay for. Guilt and sadness would be comrades All my life. And being rejected by your own mother wasn't easy to accept. It was a wound that went so deep that I doubted I'd ever get over it. I got up and walked in the mirror and studied myself. My mother's dark blue eyes looked back at me. Teh Teh blonde hair that hit just below my shoulders was nothing like her red locks. I thought I got my hair color from my father. A man I didn't know. He wouldn't even tell me his first name. He didn't even tell my nonna. He once said it was because he couldn't be a father to me. She protected me and him with her silence. I never understood that. I still haven't. I arrived and ran my fingers over the bare lobe of my ear. The piercings that once trapped my ear were almost gone by now. I couldn't wear them to the penitentiary. I was used to not having to deal with them, and I didn't want to put them back. Even without them, I was so different from the girl who left here six years ago. The rest of them could all go to hell CHAPTER 2 SHOOTING I kept retaliating outside the passenger window of my damn truck. I had two beers. That's it, that's it. If Brady hadn't been so busy with his hands all over Ivy Hollis, then he would have seen that I was sober enough to go home. How are you going to get home? I'm definitely not letting you take my truck, I told him, looking to see Brady smile. . West's going to call me. He has to take Maggie home anyway, it was his repulsive response. Ever since West got along with Brady's cousin Maggie, he'd be as good as Brady. It could lead someone to drink. You screwed up for me and Kimmy. I can't find a girl in my truck unless you drive it. And I was about it. You should be thanking me. Don't you remember the drama Kimmy caused you the last time you put her alone in your truck? He was right. Moving her loose wasn't easy. I had to take on Serena in front of her to make her leave me alone. I just grunted an answer. I didn't like it when he was right. Anyway, I muttered. Brady laughed, and I didn't have to look at him to know he was smiling. Who's this guy? asked, all the humor suddenly left his voice as he slowed the truck down. I looked at him to see which way he was looking. Following his gaze, I saw someone walking towards the back of the property. It was so dark outside, I couldn't figure out who he was. He was nothing more than a dark figure from here. Shrugging, I leaned back into the seat and closed my eyes. I was exhausted. Maybe Brady was right, and I wasn't safe to drive. It's probably Mrs. Ames. You know he works late most of the time, I answered, drowning in a yawn. It's not safe for Mrs. Aims to walk in the dark, is it? Asked. Brady was a perpetually good man. I swear that sometimes. He's going crazy. He's been doing it for a long time than I've been alive. I think he'll be fine. Mrs. Aims was our cleaner and cook. She was also my mother's mother in a way. When my mother needed advice or help, she always asked Mrs. Aims. I liked it better. More. My parents. But then I thought she liked me more than my parents, so it was mutual. Ever since my older brother Rhett was my parents' favorite child, Mrs. Aims had made it clear that I was hers. She was also a tough old lady, and I knew nothing that met her out in the dark better be ready to be taken down a notch. It could be wild. I'd seen her take more than one fight for me when I was a kid, and she always wins. Maybe I should stop and go check on her. Make sure he gets home safe. His voice still had that tone of concern. If you stop this truck, I'll drive my driver to the end, I warned him. He was the one who insisted on leading me. We were almost there now, and my bed was so close. I just wanted to go home. Besides, by the time he got to Mrs. Ames, she'd be at her house. Safe. As it always has been. You're a little piece of shit, Brady's grumbling, and he kept going about my house. I didn't offend his comment. It wasn't the first time I'd been called that. My father used to refer to me as a little piece of shit a lot. But when he said it, I knew he meant it. And I hate it. He hated me. Because even though I was carrying Lawton's last name... I wasn't his son. I was just the descendant of one of my mother's many cases. The man I called a father wasn't my biological father. When my older brother was eighteen months old, my dad had gotten prostate cancer, and even though the tumor had been removed, his trash never worked again. Brady got in my seat in our six-car garage and closed the truck, and then he threw the keys at me. Go to bed. West just sent me a message, and he's right behind us. I'm going to go meet them. I wasn't stupid. He was going to check on Mrs. Ames. I shook his head and reluctantly thanked him for taking me home in a bit before heading home. Turning the door of my father's office, I could hear him on the phone. It sounded like a job. He's always worked. That once hurt when he didn't have time to give me. Everything changed the day I heard him call me a bastard when I was 12 years old. It was more of a relief than anything else. I didn't want to be like him. His pointless life full of anger and bitterness. Worrying about how the world saw him and the appearance of this family. It was what I never wanted to be. I hated that man. I never accused my mother of cheating on him. I'd never seen him show affection for her. It was a trophy in his hand, and that was it. Nothing more. He traveled more than he was home. Where guys like West thought it was okay to love a girl, I knew better. Love wasn't it was a fleeting feeling that confused you, and then destroyed you in the end. You couldn't trust people. The moment you loved them, they had the power to hurt you. No woman would ever touch my heart. I was very smart. Smart. Where are you going? I had loved my mother once, but she had managed to ignore me -- unless she wanted to show me like an award pony -- most of my life. I loved my father, too, and I asked for his approval until I realized that one day I would never win it. Rhett was his golden child. The son he bragged about. The son who was his. I knew I was better off without all this, but it still didn't stop my heart from sometimes aching at what I'd lost. My life would be full of adventure. It was my life plan. I would never stay tied to a girl. I'd travel, see the world and leave Lawton. Never love anyone and you'll never get hurt again. When I got to my room, I looked back in the hallway in my mother's bedroom. She and my father didn't share a room. They never did. At least in my life. Maybe once, when the house was new, they had. I wasn't sure, and I didn't care to know. Her door was closed, and I knew she wouldn't check if I was home safe. Because she didn't care. None of them did. The only person who cared about me was me. Sure, I'd like to think Mrs. Ames did, but the older I got, the more I let her down. It was only a matter of time before she hated me, too. I was fine with that. I knew I could always trust myself. That's all I needed. The rest of them could go to hell. I was on a wreck ship CHAPTER 3 WILLA I was almost back at the cottage by night walking me to see if the tree house was still there when I heard crunch leaves behind me. I'm freeze. A male voice called. Hey, what are you doing here? This is private property and this house is not yours. My heart accelerated as I tried to put the faint memory I had from a young boy's voice to the deepest voice I could hear behind me. Could it be Gunner? And I was about to face him? You better talk, or I'll call the police, the guy warned. I'd seen the headlights go down the mile leading to the Lawton house a few minutes ago. They had slowed down, and I thought then that I might have to explain myself. I wasn't sure who knew I was back here. Did my nona tell anyone? From the sound of his voice, I was thinking that my presence was still secret. The door opened for the cottage and nonna showed me up. Our eyes met, and then he looked over my head at the guy behind me. I saw her face soften before she smiled. Thank you, Brady, for looking out for me. But Willa belongs here. He came back to live with me for a while. You remember Willa. You played together like children. Brady Higgins. I wish I could remember his face more clearly. The only feeling I remember it was the flutter in my stomach when it was near me. Slowly I came back to see the kid from my youth who had played such an important role. The gentle glow from the porch light touched his face, and my breath caught on a little. The beautiful boy I had left behind tall, muscular, and even more perfect than he was when we were eleven. His gaze was locked in mine, and I couldn't form words. I wanted to look away, but I never wanted to stop looking at him. It was totally confusing. Willa? His voice was a sound that made me tremble. I shook my head. I didn't trust myself to talk yet. All those silly butterflies he had caused when he was a kid were back and more intense. A smile broke in his face as he took a step towards me. He seemed happy, happy, and something else. Something I understood. Something that as much as I liked, I knew I couldn't act on it -- it seemed interested. Willa, come in now. Nona's voice was stern and there was no room for argument. Thank you again, Brady, for checking me out. Go home now so you don't have to worry about yourself. I tore my gaze off him and ran up the stairs, holding my head down so I wouldn't have to meet my nonna eyes. He had noticed that look in his eyes too. And he didn't trust me. No one did. If Brady knew, he wouldn't look at me like that. Anytime, Mrs. Ames. Have a good night, shout. I kept walking in the bedroom that belonged to me. I didn't want to hear the lecture to stay away from Brady, who I knew was coming. When the front door clicked closed. I cringed and grabbed on to my bedroom door. Not so fast. Nona's voice stopped me, and I wanted her to growl in frustration. I didn't need him to tell me what I already knew. Brady Higgins is a good guy, Willa. He's turning into a good young man. He's a quarterback on the football team, and college scouts are already trying to recruit him. He's going to make this town proud. You've seen more than this boy. You know more about the world than he does. He sees you've turned into a beautiful young woman. That's all he knows. I don't intend to tell people what happened to you. It's none of their business. But until. . . . Until you heal from it--until you're better--boys aren't something you should spend your time on. It was hard to hear. Nona called me when no one else wanted me, but she didn't trust me or believe me. That hurt. So much so that my chest hurt. All I could do was nod. Yes, ma'am, I answered before I rushed into my bedroom and closed the door on other painful words he could say. I just needed someone to ask me what really had happened and believe me when I told them. Like every night after the accident that changed my life... I didn't get much sleep. \* \* \* Enrollment for a new high school in your senior year was intimidating. Nonna reassures the director and consultant that he will not no problem was added only to it. I had to go to the counselor every Tuesday and Friday during my last class to discuss how I was. I was. I knew I should be grateful that it was the only thing I had to do, but I was still afraid of it. Nonna had shook my hand and looked me firmly in the eye while she told me to work hard and make her proud. If only he knew that's exactly what I was going to do. I had lost too much at this point to lose her, too. I'd earn her trust. I had to do it. The first bell had already rang while I was meeting with the consultant and Nonna was explaining my situation. Which meant I'd have to get into my first period with the last day. Everyone would stare at me. The teacher would stop talking, talk,

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